SALAD DAYS
Salad Day
JING SHUI BIAN WORKS
VOL.02
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# Salad Days

# □□Vol.02

# JING SHUI BIAN / □□□

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**SYNOPSIS**

Salad Days:
A Shakespearean idiomatic expression meaning a youthful time, accompanied by the inexperience, enthusiasm, idealism, innocence, or indiscretion that one associates with a young person.

This is a story about a poor but gentle, honest ballet boy and a passionate, determined boxing boy. The two met at the Children's Center, and since then, they've grown up supporting each other—even in the face of hardships and challenges—as they resolutely pursue their dreams. The beauty of salad days lies in the sweat from struggles and the nurturing of friendships. Even though the two have completely different lives, what remains the same is their warm feelings for each other…

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## Chapter 8 — Shixiong, Shijie

For three entire months, Jiang Shen survived tenaciously under Shen Junyi's devastating tutelage. Going by a normal school timeline, the first semester was about to be over.

On the other hand, because he didn't have to pay rent, Jiang Shen started to take the initiative and do the household chores to pay the Bai family back for their favor. Bai Jinyi did not stop him, even letting Auntie Zhu return to the main Bai family home, leaving only a chauffeur and someone to purchase daily necessities.

To accommodate Little Swan's daily schedule, Bai Jinyi woke up early every morning, despite his morning grumpiness. Knowing his temper, Jiang Shen kept things quiet in the early hours of the day. Every morning, the two boys would meet in the bathroom, brushing their teeth and washing their faces while facing the mirror.

With a dark face, Bai Jinyi went to the kitchen to get the sunny side up eggs. He opened a new carton of milk, filling up two glasses.

"Boil more chicken today." Bai Jinyi's mood finally improved a little after finishing one egg. "And add an extra serving of sliced beef tonight."

Jiang Shen was astonished. "We're going to eat that much?"

Pointing at himself, Bai Jinyi said, "*I'm* eating it."

Jiang Shen noted everything down in his phone, then flipped through Bai Jinyi's daily training schedule. After looking through it once, he pursed his lips. "You've increased your anaerobic training again? Did your coach request it?"

"Yes." Bai Jinyi picked up a hard-boiled egg. "I'm planning to move up to the middleweight class, so I have to put on some muscle and weight."

Having been around each other for so long, Jiang Shen's understanding of boxing could not be considered professional, but he was at least no longer the outsider he was in the beginning. Despite how the middleweight championship was worth more than the lightweight championship, it went without saying that the degree of bloodiness and danger also increased proportionately. In these last three months, Jiang Shen never missed a single one of Bai Jinyi's matches. The boxer had never lost one either, but the injuries on his body accumulated over and over again, the new replacing the old countless times.

Jiang Shen pressed his lips together. This was the first time he was displaying such overt unhappiness, but he also did not know what exactly he was angry about. In the end, he could only tidy up the table silently, then went to the kitchen to do the dishes.

Calmly, Bai Jinyi finished his last gulp of milk. Holding the glass, he leaned against the kitchen door frame. "What time do you finish classes today?"

Jiang Shen turned the tap to full blast, not wanting to respond.

Placing the glass next to Jiang Shen's hand, Bai Jinyi said mildly, "I'll come and pick you up at the usual time."

Everyday, Jing Luoyun was always the first to arrive at the studio. When she was halfway through cleaning the room, Jiang Shen arrived. Without needing to say anything, the boy would always take the initiative to help mop the floor and sweep up the dust. When they were done, Liu Xingzhi finally made a late entrance.

Jiang Shen greeted him voluntarily. "Good morning, *Shixiong*."

Liu Xingzhi glanced at him, not responding. He changed and tied his dreadlocks back.

Jing Luoyun picked up the clothes her junior threw on the floor and said resignedly, "You came here after training again?"

The clothes Liu Xingzhi had just changed out of were almost completely soaked in sweat. If Jing Luoyun were to squeeze them a little, sweat would start dripping from them. Snatching his own clothes back, Liu Xingzhi said roughly, "Stop nagging!"

Jing Luoyun said a little helplessly, "Going overboard with training won't do any good to your body. Did you forget about your ankle injury last year?"

"I'm being careful." Liu Xingzhi stretched his legs lazily. He turned to look at them and commanded, "Time to go downstairs for the morning meeting."

The third floor was filled with students of Laiyi Dance Studio. Some of them were sent there by their parents to learn ballet as a hobby, while others were adult students who had already graduated from various dance schools. This included the dance members of Shen Junyi's dance troupe, as well as many of Ren Hui's students.

Jing Luoyun had once been one of these third floor students. After some time, due to her talent and hard work, Shen Junyi accepted her as one of his.

There was no need to mention Shen Junyi's status in Laiyi. He only had three students, and when they came down from the fifth floor, many of the students from the third floor gathered by the door, staring.

Liu Xingzhi was clearly used to the attention. Ever since he was young, his talent had always stood out, and when he came with his family to Shanghai to pursue dance, he had been picked out by Shen Junyi immediately. At the age of thirteen, he swept up all the national competition awards, and after that, he was the set principal dancer for Shen Junyi's troupe. Once he turned fifteen, he started following his teacher overseas to participate in international competitions. Right now, other than Zhou Luoxiang, who was at the height of his career, Liu Xingzhi did not really view anyone else as important.

This was the first time Jiang Shen had received such a crowded welcome. Following behind Jing Luoyun, he could not help but shrink into himself, as though afraid of being noticed. Of course, in the end, he still received a contemptuous glare from Liu Xingzhi.

"Why are you flinching and hiding?" Liu Xingzhi dragged him in front of himself, scolding, "Stand up straight, don't embarrass us."

Jiang Shen had no choice but to stand in front. Around him, older students were all staring, and some of them laughed as they asked Liu Xingzhi, "Principal Liu, is this your little *shidi*? Where did he come from?"

Not daring to speak, Jiang Shen's face flushed bright red. He was afraid that the moment he opened his mouth, he would make a fool of himself, and he broke out in an anxious sweat.

Liu Xingzhi snorted from behind him and said icily, "Why do you care? Either way, he dances better than any of you, and has more talent. Know your place."

With his status as principal dancer, no one dared to object. Jiang Shen was a little surprised, sneaking a look at his senior.

Frowning, Liu Xingzhi glared at him. "What are you looking at? The meeting is about to begin."

Laiyi's weekly morning meetings were for assigning tasks to students, updating everyone on the progress of upcoming performances, as well as notifying them of upcoming competition sign-ups. The dance troupe had their own regulations, and the more well-known dancers could accept their own freelance jobs — the dance studio would not interfere too much. For people like Jing Luoyun and Liu Xingzhi, who were the top dancers in the country, not only did they have many ballet fans, even teachers like Ren Hui would help out with their performances.

"Liu Xingzhi will be holding an appreciation performance on his eighteenth birthday," Jing Luoyun explained to Jiang Shen after the meeting. "*Shifu* is helping him with the choreography as well, since it's a big deal. After all, there's only one 'first dance' in one's life." She looked at Jiang Shen, giving him a close-lipped smile. "You'll experience it in a few years too."

Jiang Shen did not dare think so far ahead, but he was still envious and a little dejected. "I'm still practicing the foundations…"

Jing Luoyun laughed. "We all went through that, and you've only been here for three months. When I first got here, I was practicing my foundations for over a year. Liu Xingzhi is so talented, and even he had been corrected for half a year."

Jiang Shen asked, "Did *Shixiong* use to dance on the grasslands before?"

Jing Luoyun responded, “Although he is registered as a Mongolian, he’s actually adopted.” Seeing Jiang Shen’s astonishment, she consoled him, “None of this is a secret. He’ll tell you himself once he’s more familiar with you.”

Jiang Shen sighed, troubled, and said quietly, “That depends on whether *Shixiong* is willing to become familiar with me…”

Jing Luoyun didn’t seem to think this was an issue at all. In any case, class had yet to start officially, so she took this opportunity to laze about, taking her junior around to familiarize him with the other students. Liu Xingzhi was a lot busier than them, as he was interviewing dancers to perform in his 'first dance'. He was very popular, and many people wanted to work with him to gain fame and exposure. They were lining up to dance the sections highlighted to them.

Jing Luoyun and Jiang Shen watched from the back door, and Jing Luoyun shook her head. “Liu Xingzhi probably won’t accept many of them.”

Jiang Shen felt that most of them had danced quite well, and asked curiously, “Why?”

“You’ve never seen Liu Xingzhi dance before, right?” Jing Luoyun’s head was lowered, a gentle smile on her face. “Just now, you asked me if he had danced on the grasslands before.”

Jiang Shen nodded.

Jing Luoyun looked at Liu Xingzhi in the dance studio, her eyes filled with both elation and envy. “No matter where Liu Xingzhi dances, you will feel that he’s right there, out on the grass.”

Shen Junyi had once said that a dancer’s soul was free.

In the past, Jiang Shen did not understand. But after seeing Liu Xingzhi, he seemed to get it.

It felt as though no matter how large the studio, it wouldn’t be enough to contain Liu Xingzhi’s soul. The youth’s shoulders were broad, and the smooth lines of his muscles drew rhythmically through the air. There seemed to be a drum-like power under Liu Xingzhi’s feet. He danced boldly, uninhibitedly, and savagely. His movements were majestic and free, yet still encompassing restrained passion.

He seemed like a youthful poplar tree, swaying next to the Ejin River.

After finishing his dance, Liu Xingzhi was covered in sweat. His muscles were clearly delineated, similar in appearance to Caucasian dancers, but his physique was even more outstanding. His dreadlocks fell out of their bundle, scattering across his shoulders, unruly.

Jing Luoyun nudged Jiang Shen. “Do you want to try?”

Jiang Shen had yet to recover from watching Liu Xingzhi's dance. Dazedly, he repeated, "Try?"

"Liu Xingzhi's 'first dance' will need quite a lot of dancers. Do you want to participate?"

Jiang Shen finally understood, but he shook his head, frightened. "*Shixiong* definitely wouldn't be willing."

Jing Luoyun asked, surprised, "Why?"

"I'm still lacking too much," Jiang Shen looked upset. "I'll end up holding *Shixiong* back."

"There's still some time until the performance. If you start practicing now, there won't be a problem."

"No." Jiang Shen's head shook like a rattle. "*Shixiong* doesn't like me; there's no way he'd let me dance."

When Bai Jinyi left the boxing gym, another new injury was added to his face. It was evident that he was in a bad mood, and he tossed his bag more forcefully than usual after getting into the car.

The chauffeur seemed to understand what he was angry about, and handed Bai Jinyi a band-aid that he had prepared ahead of time.

Looking at the rear-view mirror, Bai Jinyi put the bandage over his new injury. He looked at himself for quite some time, and still ended up leaning back into his seat with a huff, arms folded.

The chauffeur laughed. "Young Master will definitely notice it. There's no point in covering it."

Bai Jinyi said coldly, "And that's why it's annoying. I've already told them countless times to not injure my face, but those idiots just can't control themselves."

"Shall we buy the gym so that it's easier to screen out some people?"

Bai Jinyi snorted. He closed his eyes, resting, then said calmly, "What did my mother tell you this time?"

"Madam is only concerned about you."

The corner of Bai Jinyi's lips twitched. "Is it because she has too much money on her hands? Just tell her to buy a few more bags."

The chauffeur, of course, could not do that.

When Jiang Shen got into the car, he saw Bai Jinyi bundled in a hoodie, seemingly asleep. Deliberately keeping his movements quiet, he sat down next to the boy gingerly. After a while, he could not help but lean in to look at the boy's face.

Bai Jinyi shifted to one side without opening his eyes.

Jiang Shen was speechless.

He leaned in some more.

Bai Jinyi turned his head away, continuing to sleep.

Jiang Shen was even more speechless.

"Bai Jinyi." He was a little angry. "Why are you pretending to be asleep?"

Bai Jinyi remained absolutely still.

Narrowing his eyes, Jiang Shen reached out abruptly and cupped Bai Jinyi's face, forcing him to lift his head. Bai Jinyi did not expect Little Swan to be so stubborn, but it was already too late for him to cover his face with his hand.

"What happened to your face?!" Jiang Shen raised his voice for once. His words resounded in the interior of the car, "Who hit you?!!"

★

With an icy expression, Jiang Shen scooped up a big dollop of ointment with his finger, and applied it to Bai Jinyi's injured cheek.

Richie Rich Bai hissed, lowering his eyes and not saying a word.

Jiang Shen glanced at him. "It hurts?"

Pressing his tongue into his cheek, Bai Jinyi mumbled, "It's not actually that bad…"

Expressionlessly, Jiang Shen pressed harder.

Bai Jinyi did not know how to react.

His face was frightfully bruised and swollen, but he was fine as long as the inside of his mouth wasn't injured as well. Despite Jiang Shen's initial fury, by the time he finished applying the ointment, his anger had cooled, and he only felt his heart aching badly. After he was done, he still could not help himself, and blew at Bai Jinyi's injury for a very long time.

"Do you have any matches coming up?" Jiang Shen asked after packing away the ointment.

Bai Jinyi nodded. “There’s one this weekend, against last year’s national youth runner-up.”

Jiang Shen became nervous. “You’re going to fight the runner-up already?”

Bai Jinyi raised an eyebrow. “Our local boxing magazine has already called me a rising star of tomorrow. Of course I have to fight my way up. The more matches I win, the better.”

Jiang Shen had seen the boxing magazines that were delivered daily to the house, but he had never cared about them before. At the very most, he was only responsible for placing them neatly to make it easier for Bai Jinyi to read them at any time.

“Are you going to come watch?” Bai Jinyi lay on the couch. Seeing that Jiang Shen was no longer angry, he turned cheeky again, aiming at Jiang Shen’s leg with his foot. “This time, it’ll be a standard match held by the gym. You need tickets to get in. How about I get you a front row seat?”

Jiang Shen shifted, not letting him land his kick, and said deliberately, “I’m not going, I have to go to the studio and practice the dance my *shixiong* choreographed.”

Bai Jinyi huffed. “Your *shixiong* doesn’t even like you.”

Jiang Shen said, annoyed, “It’s still better than watching you get beaten up!”

Bai Jinyi had no words for that.

Although Jiang Shen said he wasn’t going to watch the match, Bai Jinyi still prepared a ticket on Friday evening, pasting it right in the middle of the bathroom mirror. The next day, when Jiang Shen looked up, he had no choice but to brush his teeth facing the ticket.

On competition day, Bai Jinyi always headed to the gym early. Jiang Shen had breakfast alone, and when he left the house, he headed back inside, removing the ticket from the mirror and shoving it into his bag.

As expected, Jing Luoyun was again the first one at the studio.

Even Jiang Shen could not help but sigh, “*Shijie*, you’re so early.”

Jing Luoyun smiled somewhat shyly, “No, no… Shenshen-*shidi* is very early too.”

Recently, Jiang Shen was no longer forced by Shen Junyi to practice his foundations. He would be participating in Jing Luoyun’s performance next month, and aside from practice, he also had to attend his academic classes.

“In the morning, it’s language and mathematics.” Jing Luoyun helped him stretch. “It’s basically content from the first and second years of junior high. You’ll be fine as long as you do lots of practice questions.”

Jiang Shen sighed. “*Shijie*, how did you find time to do practice questions in the past?”

“You’ll just have to find some time. There’s bound to be free time somewhere.”

“What about *Shixiong*?”

“Liu Xingzhi?” Jing Luoyun laughed. “His academic grades are excellent. He’s at the level where if he didn’t dance, he could apply to university.”

Jiang Shen’s jaw hit the ground, full of admiration. “*Shixiong* must be a genius!”

Before Jing Luoyun could speak, they suddenly heard coughing from the door. With his arms folded, Liu Xingzhi looked down at them from above, his dreadlocks hanging loosely, untied.

“It’s time to head downstairs for class,” he said with a calm expression.

Jiang Shen had great respect for this senior of his. He quickly got up from the floor, greeting him. Liu Xingzhi nodded reluctantly, instructing him, “Once you’re done with lunch, come up here a little earlier. You have to help *Shijie* with her choreography.”

The academic classes were held on the second floor, and the teachers Shen Junyi hired were all from proper, high-ranking high schools. Amongst the first and second year junior high students, Jiang Shen was the only one from the fifth floor.

Even without Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun’s reputations, the fifth floor was the fifth floor. The moment Jiang Shen stepped into the classroom, many eyes shifted towards him, overtly or not.

Despite that, the first class progressed very smoothly. After noting down the homework, Jiang Shen was about to listen to Jing Luoyun and copy out some practice questions. Just as he was flipping through his guidebook, a shadow suddenly appeared over it.

Jiang Shen looked up, only to see a slightly older boy standing next to his table.

“You’re alone?” The boy greeted, clearly at ease with strangers.

Jiang Shen nodded slightly. “And you are?”

“I’m Zhang Zhi.” The boy sat down, pointing at himself. “I’m from the third floor. I’ve seen you at Principal Liu’s rehearsal before, but you probably don’t remember that.”

With how the boy managed to answer his own questions, Jiang Shen really didn't know what he was supposed to respond to, because he truly hadn't noticed Zhang Zhi at all. After all, there wasn't even enough time to watch Liu Xingzhi dance during his rehearsals, where was he supposed to find the time to look at others?

Zhang Zhi did not mind at all, and asked him, "How old are you?"

"I'm fifteen traditionally."

Zhang Zhi laughed, "Why are you telling me your traditional age?" He looked at Jiang Shen, "What do you guys do everyday on the fifth floor?"

"We're also training and rehearsing everyday… same as you guys."

Zhang Zhi shook his head. "We're not the same at all. You guys are the leads, and we're just the supporting characters. I want to join Principal Liu's performance, but I might not be able to get in."

"Why not?" Jiang Shen said naively. "If you practice hard, you'll be able to get in. Although *Shixiong* is very strict, he's very hardworking as well."

Zhang Zhi froze. His gaze shifted, and his smile was a little ambiguous. "You're being overly courteous again. Everyone knows you guys are all geniuses up on the fifth floor."

Jiang Shen had truly never linked himself with the word 'genius'. He had stayed up all night yesterday to look at old boxing magazines, cutting out all the articles about Bai Jinyi, no matter big or small. He stuck them all into his nicest, empty notebook, lining them up like tofu blocks.

In his heart, the word 'genius' was used to describe people like Bai Jinyi and Liu Xingzhi. It had nothing to do with him at all.

He didn't understand why Zhang Zhi would think that, but Jiang Shen did not feel very comfortable with being called 'genius'.

But even so, Zhang Zhi still insisted on dragging him along during lunch. The third-floor students were clearly more than a little curious and interested in this little junior from the fifth floor, and clustered around the table, asking all sorts of questions.

They were all questions like "what prizes have you won", "where were you dancing previously", and "where did Master Shen find you". Jiang Shen told them the truth, but none of them believed him, putting Jiang Shen in a difficult spot, regardless of whether or not he responded.

In the end, Zhang Zhi came to his rescue. "Didn't Principal Liu say so already? He's a genius, he dances well, he's very talented, and us ordinary people cannot compare. We're all just study buddies for the crown prince, got it?" He made a few

shooing motions, “Leave, leave, don’t disturb our little crown prince from eating.”

Jiang Shen felt that he was talking nonsense, and started to become anxious. He objected, “I’m not a genius, I also work very hard at practicing and dancing. Everyone is the same.”

Zhang Zhi looked at him as though he was a fool. Fiddling with his spoon, he said, unconcerned, “Why are you taking it so seriously? I’m praising you. It’s good to be very talented, isn’t it?”

Seeing that lunch was almost over, Jing Luoyun headed downstairs to get Jiang Shen. A few days ago, she had cut her hair short again, and now, she seemed to be full of heroic spirit, looking very handsome and sharp. Gathered around the door, the girls from the third floor all greeted “Principal Yun” in delight when they saw her coming down. Jing Luoyun nodded a little, smiling shyly, “Hello, everyone.”

The girls were all in rapture, pressing a hand to their hearts and shrieking. Some even took photos with their phone, and Jing Luoyun let them be. She went to the back door of Jiang Shen’s classroom, calling out softly, “Shenshen-*shidi*.”

Jiang Shen had just finished packing his bag, and looked back to respond, “*Shijie*.”

Jing Luoyun seemed to be enveloped in a halo, moving towards him in radiant light. She took his bag, giving him a close-lipped smile, “I’m here to pick you up.”

Jiang Shen knew how much she liked taking care of others, and didn’t feel uncomfortable about it, following her up the stairs.

Liu Xingzhi was waiting for them in the corridor, his bad mood evident as he said, “I told you not to go down. I could even hear the screams from the third floor up here.”

In comparison, Jing Luoyun was much gentler. “They’re so adorable.”

Liu Xingzhi could not stop himself from rolling his eyes. “Who isn’t adorable in your eyes?”

Jing Luoyun actually considered the question carefully. Looking at her junior, she said sternly, “When you’re angry, you’re not very adorable.”

Liu Xingzhi was speechless.

For an outstanding dancer, the most important thing, other than choreographing their own dance, was to actually dance it. The theme of Jing Luoyun’s performance next month had already been decided, but she was still not satisfied with her solo.

Liu Xingzhi could be considered duty-bound to help her. Jing Luoyun had been discussing it with him all morning, but the results were not satisfactory.

“You girls always like to dance about flowers or clouds.” Liu Xingzi sprawled across the floor, as though giving up, and said in frustration, “Can’t you dance about something else for once?”

Jing Luoyun sounded resigned. “What do you suggest then?”

“Birds! Birds like eagles and cranes are beautiful too!”

It was rare to see Jing Luoyun acting out of spite. “If you like birds, you can dance about them yourself.”

“When have I *not* danced about a bird?” Liu Xingzhi got to his feet, saying proudly, “I‘ve danced about all the hawks in the grasslands already!”

He continued, as though unwilling to back down, “Also, just look at Adam Cooper. He’s even danced the role of the male swan, why are you girls looking down on birds?”

Jing Luoyun snorted a laugh. “You think we don’t dance about swans often enough? Who even knows where you were when I danced the *Dance of the Little Swans*!”

Hearing them mention Adam Cooper, Jiang Shen became interested. He raised his hand innocently, interrupting, “I’ve also watched his male version of *Swan Lake*.”

Liu Xingzhi looked down on Jiang Shen in contempt. “What are you bragging about? Who hasn’t seen it?”

Jiang Shen was not at all concerned about this blow of love that came from his senior, and said frankly, “I want to dance the male version of *Swan Lake* too.”

Liu Xingzhi was so angry, he laughed. “Who’s going to dance with you? Not me for sure.”

Jiang Shen blinked, not comprehending. “Why?”

Liu Xingzhi shot him a scornful look. “I don’t love you, so why would I want to perform a romantic ballet with you?”

Jiang Shen was stunned. He had obviously never heard of this rule before. With a face full of astonishment, he said, “Y-you have to be in love to dance it?!”

Wickedly, Liu Xingzhi continued tricking him. “Of course. It’s a romance. Without love, how can the two dancers be in tacit agreement?”

Jing Luoyun could not let this go on anymore, so she consoled Jiang Shen, “Don’t listen to his nonsense. Liu Xingzhi has already danced *Swan Lake* by himself.” Nudging Liu Xingzhi, she said ambiguously, “And it was even for Mr.

Pu."

Liu Xingzhi didn't feel awkward at all over being exposed, and said impatiently, "He was the one who spent a large amount of money to get me to dance it. Why would I reject the offer?"

This was the second time Jiang Shen had heard about Mr. Pu, and he asked curiously, "Is he *Shixiong*'s fan?"

Jing Luoyun nodded. "He likes Liu Xingzhi, and couldn't be more obsessed. He would willingly spend a large sum of money just to make you dance *Swan Lake*, a dance that's practically a love confession, alone for him. How do you still not get it?"

Liu Xingzhi did not speak. Playing with his dreadlocks, he looked a little pleased with himself.

Jiang Shen was the only one who had received a huge shock. He thought it over for some time, but perhaps because his mind was in too much of a mess, he could not straighten his thoughts out. With a blank expression, he asked, "A boy can like another boy?"

"Why not?" Liu Xingzhi's tone was very mild, as though he was talking about the weather. "There are lots of gay people in the dance world. There are men who like men, and women who like women. Since they're all human, what's the difference?"

Jing Luoyun tapped on the tip of Jiang Shen's nose, and spoke earnestly, sounding like an elder, "There's a grand tradition here at Laiyi, to dance *Swan Lake* for their beloved. In the future, if there's someone you like, make sure to continue this tradition as well, alright?"

★

Most people at the boxing gym knew Jiang Shen, and everyone greeted him with 'Little Swan' the way Bai Jinyi did. To the violent, boorish, big, strapping men, anyone with a delicate dancer as a friend was a very beautiful and uncommon thing. Jiang Shen greeted them, then was led to the waiting lounge. Bai Jinyi had just wrapped his hands, and smiled when he saw him. "You came."

Every time Jiang Shen watched Bai Jinyi's matches, he was even more nervous than when he had to dance onstage. Sitting down across the boxer, he picked up his boxing gloves.

"I'll put them on for you," Jiang Shen said.

Bai Jinyi nodded, sliding his hands into the gloves. Jiang Shen closed his eyes. Holding onto his gloves, he started to murmur under his breath again.

Bai Jinyi was speechless. “Are we starting the pre-match prayers so early this time?”

Jiang Shen said sternly, “We have to be sincere for it to come true.”

Bai Jinyi managed to hold back his laughter.

Guan Buping, a young coach from the gym, came in to make final preparations. Upon seeing Jiang Shen, he called out to him warmly, “Little Swan!”

Jiang Shen greeted him back.

Guan Buping asked, “How do you feel about sitting next to Richie Rich Bai’s manager later?”

Jiang Shen nodded, and Guan Buping looked at Bai Jingyi again, saying, “Coach Senbu is asking you if he can come in.”

Bai Jinyi gave a wave of his hand. “Let him in then.”

Senbu finally entered. He had been coaching Bai Jinyi for over three years, and because Richie Rich Bai refused to learn English, he had no choice but to learn Mandarin. Now his Mandarin was so fluent, he barely had an accent, and was even naggy. Bai Jinyi did not want to speak to him before his matches at all.

“Hi, Tundra Swan.” Senbu also liked Jiang Shen a lot, and gave the youth a warm hug. “Your muscles have become even better looking now.”

Jiang Shen had no idea how to react. He always felt that coaches and ballet teachers were terrifying. They all seemed to have x-ray vision, and were able to see how their muscles looked even through clothing.

Bai Jinyi stood up. With his boxing glove on, he grabbed Jiang Shen’s hand, saying quietly, “Go wait for me in the stands.”

Jiang Shen did not know what to say. He was so nervous, his hands were trembling a little. Bai Jinyi tightened his grip.

“I’ll win.” Bai Jinyi smiled. Looking at Jiang Shen, he said, “And I’ll also return to your side safely.”

Jiang Shen sat below the ring, and next to him was Su Fang, Bai Jinyi’s manager. Although she was referred to as his manager, she was actually an industry insider the Bai family had found for Bai Jinyi. In the past, Su Fang had managed many famous national boxers, and while working with Bai Jinyi over the past few years, she had essentially taken care of him like half a son.

“Shenshen.” Su Fang took care of herself very well, and didn’t look at all like she was past forty. Patting Jiang Shen’s back, she said, “Relax, don’t worry.”

Jiang Shen took a few deep breaths, but it clearly did not work very well.

Lifting her chin, Su Fang leaned into his ear and whispered, “Luo Zhou has entered the ring.”

The difference between the middleweight and lightweight classes could be seen easily through the boxers’ physique. Ever since Bai Jinyi decided to enter the middleweight class, gaining weight and putting on muscle were the main focus of his daily schedule. As Jiang Shen saw him every day, he couldn’t really tell the difference; however, once in the ring, that was no longer the case.

The opponent was very obviously a few years older than Bai Jinyi. Other than being taller, the broadness of his shoulders and back was also very excessive. He was, after all, the runner-up of last year’s national youth competition, so his fanclub was also much larger than Bai Jinyi’s. The screams and shouts reverberated throughout the gym.

Before Jiang Shen could look away, Bai Jinyi entered the ring from the other side.

Su Fang stood up, leading the cheers. Jiang Shen followed, standing up as well, his eyes glued tightly to that figure. Bai Jinyi seemed to notice something. Removing the hood of his robe, he looked down towards him.

Their gazes met. Bai Jinyi raised a brow, making Jiang Shen smile.

Protective gear still had to be worn for youth matches. The referee climbed into the ring, making the two boxers touch gloves as a form of respect. After they separated, Bai Jinyi adjusted his headgear. The red light for the first round was just lit when Luo Zhou already started his attack.

Su Fang’s vocal cords did not lose to the men in the boxing gym at all, nor did the crude content of her yells. Bai Jinyi did his usual circling, swinging his fists at lightning speed while avoiding punches. During the back and forth in the three minutes of the first round, both sides scored points.

Su Fang stood on tiptoe to see the judges’ scores on the screen. Frowning, she said, “We’re lagging behind.”

Jiang Shen was still very nervous. “It’s only the first round, there are more chances later.”

“It’s not going to be easy getting points on Luo Zhou. His boxing style is a little similar to Bai Jinyi’s, they’re both more defensive. Bai Jinyi has only just entered the middleweight class, and he lacks a little experience.” Su Fang paused, seeming rather open-minded about it. “As long as he doesn’t get KO’d, it’ll be fine. Bai Jinyi is still young. If he’s able to hold onto his points when facing the runner up, the media will still turn a blind eye and shower him with praise.”

Jiang Shen still didn’t really understand how the commercial side of boxing worked. He only knew that Bai Jinyi definitely did not want to lose.

As expected, in the next seven rounds, Bai Jinyi gave up on his usual circling method, and moved to a more aggressive style. In the ring, this was known as an 'exchange of blood'. It depended upon the boxer's own patience and stamina, brutally exchanging mutual blows with the opponent to see who could manage to KO the other first. This was not an uncommon strategy on the international boxing stage, and one of the most famous matches that played out in this manner was the match between David Tua and Ike Ibeabuchi. The two boxers had exchanged a total of 1700 punches, and in the end, with his unnatural ability to take hits, David Tua finally managed to knock his opponent out within 12 rounds.

The eighth round ended. As the sparring had been too intense, it took the referee quite some time before he was able to separate the two boxers and give them both a warning each. Luo Zhou changed his mouth guard, and when he rinsed his mouth, the water he spat out was a bloody red. Bai Jinyi sat down, leaning back into the post, tilting his head back to allow his coach to deal with his bleeding nose.

Biting her nails, Su Fang's expression looked complicated. She clearly hadn't expected Bai Jinyi to go all out, so she had no choice but to go up and give him a few reminders.

"I know my limits," he leaned in to speak. Since Jiang Shen was very close, he discovered that the corner of Bai Jinyi's eye was also injured.

Bai Jinyi reached out with a fist, pointing at him. "Don't make that expression, I haven't lost yet."

Jiang Shen did not speak, only nodding with reddened eyes.

The one-minute break ended. Bai Jinyi had to enter the ring again.

"There are four rounds left, save some strength," the coach said finally, "if you can't KO him, don't force it. You just need to not lose too badly."

Bai Jinyi didn't answer, only waving his arm to show that he understood.

A ring that had witnessed twelve full rounds was no longer just a ring. It was more like a trial of fire, filled with blood, sweat, and tears.

Below, Su Fang held Jiang Shen's hand, her eyes glued to the ring. She said calmly, "No matter the result, we have to watch the whole thing through, and not miss a single punch."

Jiang Shen's eyes were fixed on every punch that Bai Jinyi threw. They struck at life, shattering dreams, but also traveled through thousands of light-years of universe with no hesitation, finally landing on the glimmer of starlight that was the earth.

The bell rang. Bai Jinyi's final punch landed right on Luo Zhou's face.

The referee made a hand signal to indicate a KO, and started counting down on stage. Bai Jinyi stood where he was, motionless. When there were still five seconds left, Luo Zhou stood up.

The score had already appeared on the screen, and in the end, the judges decided that the KO had failed. After adding up the scores, Bai Jinyi was only two points behind.

Although Luo Zhou had won, it had been abnormally arduous. After winning, he didn't even feel much happiness, whereas Su Fang was nearly mad with joy. Hugging the coach and assistant, they celebrated the results.

Back at the lounge, the reporters and interviewers had completely blocked the path outside. Jiang Shen only managed to squeeze in with Guan Buping's help after a huge struggle.

Bai Jinyi had removed his hand wraps. Looking up, he saw that it was Jiang Shen, and asked, "You're here?"

Jiang Shen crouched down in front of Bai Jinyi, looking at him with a gaze that was as clear as crystal. Softly, he said, "I'm here."

The injury at the corner of Bai Jinyi's eye was quite severe, and half his face was swollen. This was the first time Jiang Shen had seen the usually proud, arrogant Bai Jinyi in such a wretched, pitiful state.

Jiang Shen couldn't help but reach out. He touched Bai Jinyi's face lightly and asked, "Does it hurt?"

"You always ask that every time I get injured."

"Because I'm unhappy when you're hurt."

Bai Jinyi seemed like he wanted to smile, but the action tugged at his injury, and he hissed in pain. "Then, are you unhappy that I've lost the match?"

Jiang Shen asked in return, "Are *you* unhappy?" He thought for a moment, then continued earnestly, "If you're upset, I'm upset; if you're happy, I'm also happy."

Bai Jinyi looked at him. After some time, the boxer finally sighed, reaching out and wrapping his arms around Little Swan. Quietly, he said, "Let me hold you for a little while."

Jiang Shen did not move. He could feel Bai Jinyi's hair tickling his cheek, and inexplicably, his ears started turning red.

"Uhh…" Jiang Shen endured it for a while, but when he really couldn't anymore, he said, a little awkwardly, "my heart's beating a little fast."

Bai Jinyi was still leaning on him, not moving at all. He asked, absentmindedly, “What’s wrong? Do you have a fever?”

Jiang Shen actually went to touch his own forehead, and answered honestly, “No, that’s not it…” He looked at Bai Jinyi’s still bare upper body, and how the exposed skin was a lot fairer than most people’s. Picking up a towel, he covered Bai Jinyi’s chest with it, and said solemnly, “There are tons of people outside, you can’t let other people see you like this.”

Bai Jinyi didn’t understand where that came from.

After finishing the post-match interviews Su Fang had arranged, Bai Jinyi went back home with Jiang Shen.

Richie Rich Bai did lose the match after all, so his mood could not be considered fantastic. He decided to just accompany Little Swan as he practiced in the studio, whiling away the time after dinner.

“How is your *Swan Lake* coming along?” Bai Jinyi asked, nestled in the beanbag chair, “When will you be able to dance for me?”

Jiang Shen was currently doing the splits, and his face was blushing, pressed right against the floor. He said falteringly, “Stop rushing me…”

“How am I rushing you? Nevermind *Swan Lake*, when’s your performance? Don’t you have a ticket for me?”

“I don’t have any, I’m just dancing in my seniors’ performances. Do you want to come and watch?”

Bai Jinyi glanced at him, and said, pretending to be cool, “Of course I want to come and watch. So what if you’re not the main lead? I know how to edit videos, I’ll just cut everyone else out.” As he spoke, he created a frame with his thumbs and index fingers, aiming it at Jiang Shen, squinting through one eye. “I’ll leave only you, just for me to see.”

Jiang Shen didn’t even know how to respond.

★

The holiday arrangements for the dance school were a little special. The winter holidays would only be ten days during the Chinese New Year period, and beyond that, even if classes were not ongoing at Laiyi, the dance troupe still had to rehearse. Besides, with principal dancers like Jing Luoyun and Liu Xingzhi, starting in the spring, all major theatres’ schedules had them fully booked for the first half of the year.

Jiang Shen kept thinking about how Bai Jinyi wanted to see him perform, so he gathered up his nerves to ask Jing Luoyun about buying a front row ticket.

After finding out, Jiang Luoyun was a little surprised. “You want to buy it for someone?”

Jiang Shen nodded, a little shy. “Mn… for a friend.”

Doing the splits next to them, Liu Xingzhi asked casually, “That friend of yours that comes to pick you up everyday in a Bentley?”

Jiang Shen looked confused. “What’s a Bentley…?”

Liu Xingzhi wanted nothing more than to roll his eyes, but he still said patiently, “Since he’s so rich, just get him to buy a ticket himself. At most, it’ll just be a little more difficult to get, and he’ll need to be fast. After all, Jing Luoyun’s fans are either rich ladies from the capital, or well-known ladies from Shanghai.”

Jing Luoyun gave an embarrassed cough. “Not all of them…”

Liu Xingzhi continued, “We work very hard to put on a show, so how can we not earn this money? Why are you being so generous?”

Jiang Shen said awkwardly, “But Bai Jinyi is an exception… How can I make him pay to watch me dance?”

Liu Xingzhi looked at him, his face full of bewilderment, “Are you crazy? In the future, you will also be leading your own dance troupes and choreographing your own shows. What, you’re never going to charge him your whole life?”

“Yup.” Jiang Shen’s face spelled earnestness and frankness. “I’m not going to let him pay. For Bai Jinyi, watching me dance will always be free.”

Jing Luoyun managed to get her hands on a first row ticket from the company, and sold it at half price to Jiang Shen. The little junior was naturally extremely grateful, and to return the favor, he put in even more effort and hard work during rehearsals. Because of this, Jing Luoyun started to feel a little embarrassed.

“You have to take care of your body,” Jing Luoyun reminded him. “Just practicing like usual is enough. If you go overboard, you’ll only harm your body. You’re still going through puberty, and it’s critical to take care of how your bones grow.”

She pointed at Liu Xingzhi. “Your *shixiong* injured himself while practicing last year, and it took him half a year of recuperation before he could return.”

Jiang Shen asked curiously, “Then are the tickets for *Shixiong*’s performances expensive?”

Jing Luoyun nodded. “Of course. The tickets for his VIP lounge are rarer than gold, and they always sell out quick.”

“Does Mr. Pu have to pay too when he comes to watch him dance?”

“Naturally.” Jing Luoyun laughed. “Not only is Liu Xingzhi the sort who looks at nothing but money, he even likes to rip off people he’s more familiar with. The closer you are to him, the more expensive the ticket gets, and those deathly loyal fans of his are all more than happy to go along with it.”

This was the first time Jiang Shen had heard that such a rule could exist. He had truly never heard of anything similar before, and wasn’t able to respond for a long time.

Jing Luoyun patted him on the head. “In any case, his relationship with Mr. Pu is not as simple as you think. Once you’ve seen more of it for yourself, you’ll understand.”

As winter descended, the weather in the South was truly too cold to bear. Only a few days into winter break, Jiang Shen had to start attending make-up academic classes again. Bai Jinyi’s mansion had floor heating from top to bottom, and it was usually as warm as spring inside. But for some reason, the heating broke down a few days ago. So close to Chinese New Year, the repairmen had all returned to their hometowns, and the earliest anyone could come to fix it would be after the New Year. As a result, recently, Jiang Shen had been shivering as he got out of bed, doing his warmups as he brushed his teeth and washed his face.

In comparison, Bai Jinyi was much more cold resistant. Due to the low temperature, his temper was no longer so fiery in the mornings. When he came back from his morning runs, it seemed as though steam was rising from him.

“Why don’t you get a hand warmer?” He looked at the tips of Jiang Shen’s fingers, hidden beneath the long sleeves of his knitted sweater. “Are you wearing socks?”

Jiang Shen was so cold, his teeth were chattering. “Y-yes.”

“Did you turn on the air conditioning at night?”

“I can’t, my face will be completely chapped.”

Bai Jinyi took out a tub of horse oil moisturizer. Scooping some into his palm, he lifted Jiang Shen’s chin. “Apply this.”

Jiang Shen tilted his head up obediently. Bai Jinyi’s hands were warm and dry, and he applied the lotion very gently. After a few strokes across his face, Jiang Shen’s face started to heat up without his permission.

“I’ll do it myself…” Jiang Shen said, blushing.

Bai Jinyi put the tub away. “I’m done.”

Jiang Shen rubbed his face; it really was quite smooth and soft.

Bai Jinyi seemed to want to laugh, but he managed to hold it back. He said mildly, eating his porridge, “It’s too cold these days, let’s sleep together tonight.”

Jiang Shen was shocked. “W-w-where are we sleeping?”

“You can sleep in my room, or I’ll sleep in yours, just pick one.”

Zhang Zhi was now Jiang Shen’s permanent deskmate. During morning classes, due to Bai Jinyi, the Little Swan was very distracted, until Zhang Zhi nudged him quite a few times.

“What happened to you?” Zhang Zhi asked. “Did you not sleep well last night?”

Jiang Shen came back to himself, mumbling, “The weather’s too cold…”

“It’s too torturous to be practicing at a time like this. Are you going to practice in the afternoon?”

Jiang Shen shook his head. “I’ve already practiced this morning.”

Zhang Zhi stared at him for a little while, asking in astonishment, “You’ve already practiced…?”

“I have to practice in the evening too.” Jiang Shen frowned, looking at Zhang Zhi. “Isn’t that the bare minimum?”

Zhang Zhi was quite surprised. “Are you always this hardworking?”

“*Shijie*’s performance rehearsals are very important, aren’t you performing as well?”

Zhang Zhi nodded. “Aside from me, half the class has been selected as well. Everyone likes Principal Jing quite a lot, she’s so nice.”

“*Shijie* is very strict. She hasn’t even selected her supporting lead yet.”

Zhang Zhi laughed. “Why would she need to select one? It’ll definitely be you.”

The supporting lead role for Jing Luoyun’s performance would be officially selected that afternoon, and the contenders were Jiang Shen and two other dancers. Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun were both present during the selection process. They sat in front of the full-length mirrors, looking proper and stern, asking each dancer to dance before them one by one.

The dancers who were not auditioning for the spot all gathered in a circle on the floor, and started to secretly gossip about the dancers on the list.

“What’s the point of holding this pretence of an audition?” A female dancer grumbled quietly. “There’s only three people on the fifth floor. If Principal Liu is

not dancing, then it'll obviously be Jiang Shen."

Someone objected. "Maybe not. He's still young, so perhaps he doesn't have enough experience on stage. What if he can't perform to demand?"

Another person laughed snidely. "What does that have to do with anything? They only look at talent on the fifth floor, alright? They're the children chosen by heaven. This sort of so-called audition is only for show. Even if he doesn't dance well, it'll definitely still be him."

Zhang Zhi could not continue listening to this. He turned around, saying sternly, "Jiang Shen works very hard. With how much he practices, there's no way he'll dance badly."

The rest of the people exchanged a look, not really believing him. "Weren't you the one who said that he was a genius?"

"He *is* a genius," Zhang Zhi said with great assurance, "but, being a genius and being hardworking are not mutually exclusive. He's both a genius and hardworking."

Jiang Shen finally finished his last move, and Jing Luoyun could not help the smile blooming on her face. Liu Xingzhi gave a slow, lazy stretch, and made a mark on the audition list with his pen.

"Supporting lead," he announced, "Jiang Shen."

The other two dancers looked regretful, but it wasn't something they couldn't accept. Liu Xingzhi made Jiang Shen stand next to him as his gaze swept across the crowd, and asked suddenly, "The weather's cold now. Have you all been practicing properly?"

Unlike Jing Luoyun, when Principal Liu reprimanded people with a stern face, the pressure they felt was no less than the pressure they felt from Shen Junyi. As such, whenever Shen Junyi was not around, the task of supervision would also fall onto Liu Xingzhi.

Seeing no one responding, he smiled mockingly. "Quite a few of the third floor's conversations have made their way into my ears. You all seem to have quite a lot of free time."

Jiang Shen blinked, seeming to realize what was going on. Just as he was about to speak, Jing Luoyun grabbed his hand. She put her finger to her lips, signalling him to listen.

"You." Liu Xingzhi randomly pointed his pen at a girl. "How long do you practice each day?"

The other party was clearly scared of him. Standing up, she answered, trembling, "F-four hours?"

Liu Xingzhi snorted. “Those of you who practice more than four hours, raise your hand.”

More than half the people from the third floor raised their hands.

“Six hours.”

This time, only a dozen or so people had their hands up.

Liu Xingzhi continued, “Eight hours.”

Almost no one still had their hands raised.

Liu Xingzhi could not help but laugh. “With your skills, you guys actually dare talk so shamelessly about us behind our backs.” He surveyed the crowd, dropping his smile as he said icily, “Jing Luoyun was once your *shijie* on the third floor. Do you guys really not know why she was promoted to be a principal dancer on the fifth floor?”

Everyone was dead silent, and they did not even have the courage to look up at Liu Xingzhi.

“With constant diligence, your efforts will not be in vain.” Liu Xingzhi said calmly, “You don’t need me to repeat the meaning of that, right?”

“When you were attending your classes this morning, Liu Xingzhi had gone down to supervise a few times,” Jing Luoyun smiled and explained to Jiang Shen after everyone had dispersed. “You’re too easy to bully, really. Why do you just listen to anything they say? You don’t even come back and tell us.”

Jiang Shen scratched the back of his head, a little embarrassed. “They didn’t say anything much… and I did refute them.”

Liu Xingzhi could not stop himself from mocking him. “With your comebacks, don’t tell people you’re my junior! The fifth floor can’t afford to lose dignity like that.”

Jiang Shen had no response to his admonishment, and could only kneel on the floor obediently, wiping it.

Jing Luoyun said warmly, “Shenshen-*shidi* is adorable. Besides, just look at how well he danced today. See? They don’t dare say anything now.”

“What else would they dare say?” Like an arrogant lord, Liu Xingzhi placed a foot on the bar, his tone aggressive and haughty. “It’s fine if they call me a genius, but how is this foolish *shidi* of mine a genius? He practices twelve hours a day, yet he is only at this level. He’s far from a genius!”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Although Liu Xingzhi had spoken up for him for once, Jiang Shen did not feel that having his skills so heartlessly mocked was something to be happy about.

This was especially so when he finished his evening practice that night. When he left the bathroom after his shower, he was again left trembling in the freezing cold. The bed was also cold to touch, and no matter how he tossed and turned, he was unable to fall asleep.

Jiang Shen thought about ballet, then thought about his seniors. But in the end, Bai Jinyi was the one that popped into his head, and all he could feel was anxiousness, wondering why the other boy had not come to look for him despite saying that they would sleep together that night. He sat up to look at the door a few times. Finally, gritting his teeth, he carried his blanket and pillow, making his way out of his room stealthily.

"If he's not coming, then I'll go over…" Jiang Shen murmured, consoling himself, "as a man, I can't go back on my word and think too much."

★

Bai Jinyi wasn't in bed yet. He was sitting on the carpet, reading a boxing magazine that had just been delivered today. Hearing a noise by the door, he hid the magazine on reflex.

Carrying his pillow and blanket, Jiang Shen poked his head in.

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. "You…"

Jiang Shen grumbled in a rare show of unhappiness, "This morning, didn't we say we'd be sleeping together tonight? Why didn't you come over?"

Bai Jinyi almost couldn't control the curving of his lips and objected, deliberately giving him a stern look, "I asked you to decide between coming to my room or me going over. You didn't say you wanted me to go to your room, so how was I supposed to know?"

Jiang Shen vaguely recalled their conversation, and realized Bai Jinyi really did seem to have said something like that. Thinking about it now, he could only continue with this line of conversation and say, "T-then I'm coming now…"

Bai Jinyi leaned against the side of the bed, pulling open the blanket. "Come on then."

Hugging his blanket and pillow, Jiang Shen climbed into Bai Jinyi's bed happily. He was no longer very sleepy, and stretched half his body out of the bed, asking, "What are you doing?"

Bai Jinyi pulled the magazine out from under his butt. “I’m just flipping through.”

Jiang Shen leaned over, resting his chin on Bai Jinyi’s shoulder. “Are there any articles about you?”

Bai Jinyi put on a pretense. “I don’t know, I haven’t seen any yet.”

Jiang Shen held his hand out. “Let me see.”

Bai Jinyi passed him the magazine. Jiang Shen flipped through carefully for a while, then reached the page with Bai Jinyi’s interview.

“Quick, look! Here!” Jiang Shen held the magazine right in front of Bai Jinyi’s face excitedly. “It’s an entire page! It’s full of compliments about you!”

Bai Jinyi looked pretty unconcerned. “What compliments?”

Jiang Shen started to read, “Fledgling Bai Jinyi, the youngest star in the boxing ring and the future of the sport. His boxing style is varied and steady, and no matter if it’s his footwork that makes him seem like a pirate on a ship, or his powerful punches and ability to take hits, Bai Jinyi has shown us astonishing potential that’s far beyond someone of his age! His fists are as quick as lightning! As strong and weighty as mountains! In the future, he will definitely be at the forefront of boxing in China, leading us onto the world’s stage, towards glory!”

The more Jiang Shen read, the more excited he became. He rolled out of bed to get his scissors and notebook, preparing to cut out the page and paste it in there. Not knowing whether to laugh or not, Bai Jinyi asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m collecting all of them for you. Look, I’ve nearly filled half the notebook.”

“It’s all just some nonsense flattery, there’s no point in collecting them.”

“What’s nonsense flattery?” Jiang Shen had again learned a new, trendy phrase today. He didn’t really care, and said, “*Aiyah*, nevermind. I’m going to save all the articles praising you regardless.”

“When you start performing on stage in the future, there will also be people praising you like this.”

“Really?” Jiang Shen pasted the article carefully into his book, and blew on the page earnestly a few times once he was done. He thought about it, then said, “It’s fine if they praise me, but I’m happier when you’re praised.”

Bai Jinyi did not speak, but got into bed and lay down next to Jiang Shen. Little Swan put away Bai Jinyi’s book of nonsense flattery, humming a little tune he had heard from somewhere as he crawled under the blankets.

“Are you cold?” Jiang Shen asked. He warmed up his feet, then wrapped them around Bai Jinyi’s, rubbing lightly. “I’ve bought you a ticket to my *shijie*’s performance already.”

They laid down next to each other, face to face. Bai Jinyi’s gaze landed on Jiang Shen and asked, “Were you afraid I wouldn’t be fast enough to get a ticket?”

Jiang Shen nodded. “*Shixiong* says that *Shijie*’s fans are all rich, well-known ladies from Beijing and Shanghai. They’re all very skilled at getting tickets, not even scalpers can beat them.”

Bai Jinyi laughed softly. “What nonsense.”

“It’s true.” Jiang Shen was afraid he would not believe him. “There’s even a Jing Luoyun super topic on Weibo, and it has millions of posts. The fans call themselves ‘Fairies of Paradise’, and they say that *Shijie* is a cloud in the sky. They want to watch *Shijie* dance in paradise.”

Bai Jinyi was at a loss for words. He clearly did not understand the literary and artistic culture of ballet fans.

Jiang Shen was rather envious. “I don’t know if I’ll have a super topic and fans in the future. What do you think my fandom should be called?”

Bai Jinyi actually took a moment to consider it seriously, and asked in complete sincerity, “How about the Little Swan Ecological Protection Centre?”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Due to the warmth from an extra body, the blankets became toasty quickly. Half of Jiang Shen’s face was tucked under the blanket, and he giggled to the point where his eyes were nearly closed. Unable to stand it, Bai Jinyi asked, “What are you so happy about?”

Jiang Shen whispered, “I’m happy because we’re sleeping together.”

Bai Jinyi maintained a poker face, saying deliberately, “What a baby.”

Jiang Shen was so happy, he didn’t care what Bai Jinyi said. He leaned in closer to the other boy, his warm breath spreading onto Bai Jinyi’s neck.

“Bai Jinyi,” Jiang Shen asked softly, pressing against his ear, “have you ever been afraid when boxing?”

Bai Jinyi was a little sleepy. Curling an arm around Jiang Shen’s shoulders, he mumbled, “Probably… I’m afraid of losing, especially when you’re there.”

“Why?”

With his eyes half-shut, Bai Jinyi thought about it for a while, before answering, “I want to be the most impressive person in your heart, like a hero. The sort that’s invincible.”

“You *are* invincible,” Jiang Shen said earnestly, “In my heart, you’re already a hero.”

Bai Jinyi snorted, laughing. He ruffled Jiang Shen’s hair a little roughly. “Don’t copy those magazines, spouting such nonsense flattery.”

“I’m not.” Jiang Shen squirrelled into his arms some more, nuzzling Bai Jinyi’s chin with his forehead. “I mean every word I say.”

“What about you?” Bai Jinyi asked. “When you’re dancing, what are you thinking about?”

Jiang Shen did not respond immediately. After a while, he finally mumbled unhappily, “*Shifu* told me before, that I need to know why I dance.”

“How did you answer?”

“I told him it’s because I like it.” His voice grew quiet. “But *Shifu* said that ‘liking it’ isn’t worth anything, and that he wants me to think about it again properly.”

Like comforting a child, Bai Jinyi patted Jiang Shen’s back soothingly and asked, “Then, have you thought about it?”

Jiang Shen seemed to be sleepy as well. He rubbed his eyes, murmuring, “I’ve thought about it for a very long time already, but it’s still because I like it… When I dance, I’m not able to be like my seniors at all. I think of many things.”

“I think about my village, the rice plants in the paddy fields, the fish in the ponds… I’ll think about Tony in my yard, my parents, Goumao, Shubao-*ge* as well as Qingling-*zi*.”

Bai Jinyi did not speak. He continued listening quietly.

Jiang Shen seemed to be between sleeping and being awake, and buried his face into Bai Jinyi’s shoulder. “I think about you as well.”

Bai Jinyi asked softly, “What about me?”

He waited for a while, but did not receive an answer. Jiang Shen was already asleep.

Bai Jinyi looked down. He studied the other boy’s peaceful, sleeping face for a very long time. Closing his eyes, he pressed his lips gently against Jiang Shen’s forehead.

In order to speed up the process of mastering the dance for Jing Luoyun's performance, Jiang Shen did not go home for New Year for the first time ever. Bai Jinyi also found some excuse and managed to stay in Shanghai, accompanying him. Still, the Bai family had arranged for them to have a New Year's Eve dinner, hiring a chef to be in charge of all of their food during the holiday.

On the night of Chinese New Year's Eve, Goumao and Jiang Shen had a video call. Qingling-*zi* specially took out a drawing she had just completed, placing it right in front of the camera. It was a drawing of Jiang Shen dancing.

"Does it look nice?" Qingling-*zi* asked proudly. "I've won a prize again for this drawing. Later, I'll hang it up in your house."

Goumao squeezed his face into the frame. "Let me tell you, my sister's prize-winning drawings could fill up an entire village!"

Jiang Shen could not stop laughing, and he waved Bai Jinyi over to take a look as well.

The two boys extended their New Year greetings to the adults in the house, and the elders even caught up with the times, sending Jiang Shen red packets through Wechat.

Finally, Shen Shubao carried the rooster over, letting Tony face the camera. He joked, "Do you want us to scatter some rice and make Tony bow to you a few times?"

Jiang Shen nearly died laughing. "Why did it put on weight again?"

Shen Shubao answered, "It's winter now, of course it needs to fatten up."

As the two boys were talking, the sound of firecrackers exploding could be heard outside. Carrying the laptop, Shen Shubao headed out. "You're not allowed to light any firecrackers in the big cities, right?"

Jiang Shen nodded. "Yes, it's quiet here."

Shen Shubao flaunted, "We even bought big fireworks this year." He turned the laptop around, facing the camera towards the yard. Goumao was still asking, "Can you see me?!"

Jiang Shen answered loudly, "Yes!"

Hearing that, Goumao squatted down and lit the fuse. The spark burned for a while, then shot upwards in a flash of light, whistling, then burst into bright, riotous colors in the dark of the night.

Goumao had one arm around Qingling-*zi* and the other around Shen Shubao. They gathered neatly in front of the camera, a shower of bright, glowing sparks

arcing through the night sky behind them.

“Little Swan!” The three of them shouted joyfully. “Happy New Year!”

## Chapter 9 — The History of Laiyi

As expected, Jing Luoyun's performance was a large-scale gathering for rich, well-known ladies; more than half the audience was made up of female dance fans. Bai Jinyi wore a suit for the first time, and sat in the first row. Next to him were ladies dressed in gorgeous couture, holding up their cameras with huge zoom lenses and taking photos the entire time.

As he was the supporting lead role, the number of scenes Jiang Shen had was second only to the principal dancer, Jing Luoyun. The two of them even danced together for quite a number of scenes. During the curtain call, Jing Luoyun deliberately pulled Jiang Shen to the front of the stage, where she bowed and thanked him.

After the curtains finally fell, Bai Jinyi was invited backstage. The entrance to Jing Luoyun's dressing room was filled with flowers from her fans, and in comparison, the entrance to Jiang Shen's dressing room was extremely desolate. Bai Jinyi entered, and Jiang Shen just happened to be removing his makeup.

Jiang Shen did not seem to be affected by the difference in popularity at all. His upper body was bare, and he had yet to wipe off his sweat. A thin layer covered his beautiful, well-defined muscles. The makeup artist was removing his eyeliner, and when Jiang Shen caught sight of Bai Jinyi in the mirror, he turned around delightedly, smiling. "You're here!"

Bai Jinyi walked closer. "Are you tired?"

"Nope." Jiang Shen was very buoyant. "I'm so happy from dancing!"

He looked at Bai Jinyi, a little pleased. "I can also ask you to come backstage now. This is called privilege!"

The makeup artist was unable to hold herself back. "The little *laoshi* is really too naive. Once you're famous, you can invite however many friends or family you want backstage."

The boy who was just talking about privilege became embarrassed the very next second. "N-no, I don't have that many friends and family…"

Bai Jinyi watched her remove his makeup for a while, then suddenly said, "I'm going to the washroom."

Jiang Shen was rather reluctant for him to leave. "Come back quick, alright?"

Bai Jinyi stepped outside, walked to the end of the corridor, and gave his chauffeur a call. "Buy a bouquet… wait." He looked towards Jing Luoyun's door again. "Buy one of those grand flower stands, the bigger the better, and I want a swan design on it."

The chauffeur was at a loss for words.

Bai Jinyi then asked, “How long would that take?”

The chauffeur gave him a timeframe, and Bai Jinyi made some calculations. “They still have the celebratory after party. The flowers should be able to get here just before they leave. You can just place it in the most ostentatious spot by the entrance of the theatre.

The chauffeur asked, “… Do you want to put your name on it?”

“No need,” said Bai Jinyi. From the corner of his eye, he suddenly caught sight of Shen Junyi standing in the corridor, and finished instructing the chauffeur quietly. Upon hanging up, he was just about to go over to greet the man, when he discovered there was someone else standing in front of Shen Junyi.

Shen Junyi’s expression was stern and cold as he said caustically, “You can even get a ticket to Luoyun’s performance? It mustn’t have been easy.”

Bai Jinyi could not see the other man’s face, but his voice was not foreign to him. Soft and lilting, it sounded very calm. It was Zhou Luoxiang. “I do at least have *some* status in this circle, how could I not come and support a junior’s performance?”

Shen Junyi seemed to be enduring a huge amount of disgust as he snorted. “You think I don’t know exactly who you came to see?”

Zhou Luoxiang sighed. “*Shixiong*…”

“Don’t call me that.” Shen Junyi waved his hand, speaking impatiently, “I don’t have a *shidi* like you.”

Zhou Luoxiang fell silent for a while, then spoke to Shen Junyi with great patience, “I know you’re angry with me, but that’s already far in the past, and Ai Lai…” Mentioning this name, Zhou Luoxiang paused before continuing, “You’ve also seen how Jiang Shen dances. He’s not a student like Xingzhi or Luoyun, he’s almost exactly the same as Ai Lai. The obstacle that Ai Lai never managed to overcome back then, are you able to guarantee that Jiang Shen will be able to?”

Shen Junyi’s sore spot seemed to have been poked at, and he could no longer suppress the dark expression on his face. Gritting his teeth, he said stiffly, “Ai Lai is Ai Lai, and Jiang Shen is Jiang Shen. He’s a student I’m teaching personally, do you think I don’t know?!”

Zhou Luoxiang’s voice was cutting. Although he was smiling, there was quite a bit of mockery to it. “At that time, Ai Lai was also your *shidi*, and mine as well. You and I were both aware of what he faced, but was that any use?”

“In your eyes, there’s only dancing,” Zhou Luoxiang said plainly, “Did you not know what was in Ai Lai’s heart back then?”

Shen Junyi remained silent.

Zhou Luoxiang took out his handkerchief. Covering his mouth, he coughed lightly, “I’m not deliberately trying to steal your student, but Jiang Shen is different. Sure, with you, he’ll be able to learn more, better techniques, but dancing isn’t just about technique.”

Zhou Luoxiang looked at Shen Junyi, his brows knitting as he said softly, “He’s just like Ai Lai, and when they dance, they’re not simply just dancing.”

Shen Junyi stood by the door of Jiang Shen’s dressing room, his hand on the doorknob, but never turning. Bai Jinyi walked over and opened it for him.

Shen Junyi only noticed him half a beat later and was a little startled. “When did you get here?”

Bai Jinyi said indifferently, “When you were talking to that sissy.”

Shen Junyi was baffled. It took him quite some time to realize that the ‘sissy’ Bai Jinyi mentioned was Zhou Luoxiang…

Clearly, Bai Jinyi had no tact as he asked directly, “Who is Ai Lai?”

There was a look of resignation on Shen Junyi’s face. He made a shushing motion, before asking in a quiet voice, a little embarrassed, “That doesn’t really have anything to do with you, does it?”

Raising a brow, Bai Jinyi stared at Shen Junyi for a little while. Then, with a little smirk, he said, “Alright.”

Shen Junyi did not know what he meant by that, and could only give him a solemn warning. “Don’t go telling Jiang Shen any sort of nonsense. In the future, I’ll explain it clearly to him myself.”

The celebration party was held in Jing Luoyun’s dressing room, and Liu Xingzhi came as well. He very clearly had the self-awareness of a famous dancer, and was wrapped up tightly from head to toe. Even his dreadlocks were tucked in a scarf.

Jing Luoyun had a few big fans who received special treatment; the sort that allowed them to come to the dressing room and join the celebration. After greeting them, Liu Xingzhi even chatted with them for a little while. In the end, he pointed at Jiang Shen, whatever they were talking about a mystery.

“They asked me what your name was.” Liu Xingzhi came over with a drink. Dancers pretty much never ate anything sweet or drank any alcohol, so his glass was just filled with plain soda water. “You performed quite well today.”

To receive praise from Liu Xingzhi, even if Jiang Shen did not immediately burst into tears of joy, he was still overwhelmed by the positive favor. Meanwhile, this

was the first time Bai Jinyi had met this senior with a head full of ‘centipedes', and his eyes were naturally drawn to his hair as well.

Liu Xingzhi’s hair had been properly tidied up for once today. Neat and clean, it was tied up in a ponytail. It was still early spring, and the weather had yet to warm up, but it was as though he was not afraid of the cold. After removing his coat, he wore a sweater with a low collar underneath, exposing a great deal of his tanned, muscled chest.

“*Shijie* has a lot of fans,” Jiang Shen said a little enviously as he looked at Jing Luoyun surrounded by a crowd of people.

Liu Xingzhi glanced over coolly. “This happens to all dancers who’ve held the principal position a few times, and there will be quite a number of extremely rich fans. Do you see that lady dressed in Dior haute couture?” He held up a few fingers. “She bought Jing Luoyun an entire dance studio.”

Bai Jinyi suddenly interrupted, “Where?”

Liu Xingzhi paused in surprise. He looked at Bai Jinyi, frowning as he asked, “Who are you?”

Just as Jiang Shen was about to introduce him, he heard Bai Jinyi starting to speak pretentiously, “I’m Jiang Shen’s fan.”

He emphasized every single one of his words earnestly, “The sort that is very, very rich.”

Bai Jinyi’s declaration of being “very, very rich” was fully expressed once the party ended. Walking out of the theatre, the group saw a grand flower stand by the door. It was over two meters long, and there was even a life-sized swan made of white roses on it. To make it ‘ostentatious’ enough, the Bai family chauffeur even hired a dozen handsome foreigners to stand around the flower stand, holding bouquets. Upon seeing Jiang Shen, confetti cannons extended out from the bouquets. With a pop, the air was full of colorful ribbons.

Speechless, Jiang Shen stood in front of the flower stand, completely dumbstruck. His arms were full of bouquets that other people had shoved at him, and on his head were confetti and ribbons.

This was probably also the first time Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun had seen such an impressive way of giving flowers. The entire place was dead silent. For a while, no one could say a word.

Meanwhile, Bai Jinyi was not bothered. He tilted his head down towards Jiang Shen, explaining, “This was my first time, so I didn’t have any experience. Next time, I will get people to deliver the flowers to your dressing room before your performance.”

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For a very long time after, Bai Jinyi's crass, tacky, and ostentatious manner of sending flowers that spoke strongly of his lack of aesthetics garnered a lot of attention and discussion amongst the ballet circle. However, the person involved was just like his fists. He ignored all critique and comments, moving straight forward instead and sticking to his guns.

Since Bai Jinyi did not care, naturally, Jiang Shen didn't either. Although he occasionally felt a pang of envy over the large number of fans his seniors had, he only remained at the stage of envy, never developing any further.

The two boys spent the entire winter sharing a bed. As the weather gradually warmed up, Jiang Shen was a little too embarrassed to continue stealing Bai Jinyi's bed space, so he moved back to his own room. Bai Jinyi was not very happy about it, but he did not say anything. In the end, it was Jiang Shen who became somewhat disappointed instead.

There were four seasons in a year, and every season had its days and nights. As the days and seasons went by, Jiang Shen danced more dances, performed on even more stages, and most importantly, made use of every bit of time he had to learn *Swan Lake*.

When Jing Luoyun and Liu Xingzhi found out he was learning *Swan Lake*, they laughed at him for a very long time. Employing both hard and soft tactics, they kept asking him who the person he liked was.

"*Aiyah*, he doesn't know yet." Jiang Shen was bent backwards in half, his face against the floor. "Stop asking me."

Jing Luoyun asked, "What does he not know? Does he not know you'll be dancing for him, or that you like him?"

Jiang Shen said, "He doesn't know the meaning behind the dance…"

Liu Xingzhi was baffled. "He's an outsider to ballet? Then what's the point in dancing it for him? You're casting pearls before swine."

Jiang Shen could only say, "I'll just dance first and see what happens next."

Either way, Liu Xingzhi did not really approve, but seeing how deeply sincere this little junior of his was, not hiding an iota of his earnestness, he helped Jiang Shen break the dance down, modifying it for him.

"It's not very possible to dance the whole ballet, just dance the part when they meet by the lake." Liu Xingzhi pointed out the movements on the screen. "Pay attention to their gazes. See how Adam Cooper's eyes are brimming with emotion? Use your eyes and electrify him!"

Jiang Shen watched carefully for a bit, then asked curiously, "Did you electrify Mr. Pu in the same way as well?"

Liu Xingzhi was speechless. “As a person, you can’t be too frank. Understand, little baby swan?”

The ‘legendary love’ between Liu Xingzhi and Mr. Pu was a popular, weekly gossip topic at Laiyi Dance Studio. Liu Xingzhi seemed to be used to it already. After all, Mr. Pu wasn’t his only rich fan. The quantity and quality of his and Jing Luoyun’s fans were popular topics at Laiyi.

In six months, Liu Xingzhi’s ‘first dance’, held on his eighteenth birthday, would be Laiyi’s greatest performance gala. Shen Junyi was even personally helping with the choreography. From just that, it was clear how important this event was.

“Are you going to confess before Xingzhi’s ‘first dance’?” Jing Luoyun was counting the days. “Can your body handle learning two different performances at the same time?”

“I can, I can. I most likely won’t be the supporting lead in *Shixiong*’s dance… so I wouldn’t have that big of a part.”

“Why not?” Jing Luoyun was quite surprised and she shook her head. “You’re underestimating yourself too much. Over the past two years, you’ve already garnered quite a bit of fame performing on tours, and many people in the industry have asked *Shifu* about you. It’s just that *Shifu* doesn’t want you to participate in national competitions yet, so he hasn’t really spoken too much about you.”

Jiang Shen really did not know about this. He whispered secretively to Jing Luoyun, “Then, *Shijie*, do I have a fan club? Did someone create a super topic for me?”

Jing Luoyun did not know whether to laugh or not. “That’s not the point, is it?”

Jiang Shen had truly never thought about being the supporting lead for Liu Xingzhi’s ‘first dance’. Of course, if he could, that would be great for his dancing career and fame. Liu Xingzhi was no longer as hostile as he used to be when Jiang Shen had first joined the studio, but that didn’t mean Liu Xingzhi had lost his sense of competition when it came to him.

Within a month, Shen Junyi auditioned many dancers for the supporting lead role. Liu Xingzhi was also part of the selection process, but he sat there, bored, with both his arms and legs crossed.

After watching another dancer’s audition, Shen Junyi took a break.

A little fatigued, he sighed, his forehead deeply creased.

“What’s your opinion?” He asked Liu Xingzhi.

Liu Xingzhi said nonchalantly, “I don’t think there’s any point in watching them. It’s not like Jiang Shen can’t take on the role.”

Shen Junyi shot him a frosty look, saying calmly, “Not him.”

Having watched so many auditions, Liu Xingzhi had long since lost his patience. Frustrated, he sat up straight, pressing both palms against his knees. “Why not? He’s my junior. You’ve been insisting that I take care of him right from the start. Now that he’s finally made a name for himself, you’re not letting him dance. What is it about him that you’re not satisfied with?”

“It’s not that I’m unsatisfied with him.” Shen Junyi suppressed his temper, his voice stiff and cold. “He has a completely different style from you and Jing Luoyun, he’ll stick out like a sore thumb. He’s able to dance on stage for our usual little performances, but for such an important stage like your ‘first dance’, he can’t.”

Liu Xingzhi froze for a second, then became so angry that he laughed. “I’m not of the same style as Jing Luoyun, but wasn’t I the supporting lead for her ‘first dance’? What’s the difference…”

Shen Junyi waved his hand, cutting him off roughly. “In any case, no. He can’t dance for you. Look for someone else!”

Liu Xingzhi slammed the door behind him forcefully, bundling up his dreadlocks as he stalked down the corridor fiercely. When Ren Hui stepped out of her office, he nearly knocked her over, giving her a fright. “What happened? Why are you in such a temper?”

Liu Xingzhi ignored her, going straight up to the fifth floor. Just as Ren Hui was feeling confused, she saw Shen Junyi walk out of the studio with a dark expression.

“What happened?” Ren Hui asked him. “You guys had a fight?”

Shen Junyi’s head hurt. “Since when did Liu Xingzhi’s relationship with Jiang Shen become so good?”

Ren Hui blinked. “It… hasn’t? He’s always been quite scornful of Jiang Shen. Every time I see them, Liu Xingzhi is always commanding Little Swan to run various errands, then complains about him afterwards.”

“Little Swan?” Shen Junyi’s face was covered in question marks.

“Ah, right, you don’t know yet. Jiang Shen’s nickname is Little Swan, and his fan club is called The Little Swan’s Ecological Protection Center.”

Shen Junyi was at a loss for words.

Somewhat pleased with herself, Ren Hui said mysteriously, “I’m already a ‘Motherly Caretaker’ fan now.”

Jiang Shen was still on the fifth floor practicing a part from *Swan Lake*. Jing Luoyun was next to him, helping him correct some details. The two were talking as Liu Xingzhi suddenly burst in through the door.

Startled, Jing Luoyun stood up. "You're done with the auditions already?"

Liu Xingzhi sat himself on the floor, and said in a huff, "Auditions, my ass!"

Jiang Shen and Jing Luoyun exchanged a look, both sitting down next to him.

"What happened?" Jing Luoyun asked.

Liu Xingzhi looked towards Jiang Shen, asking a little cuttingly, "You're already sixteen, why don't you have any opinions of your own?"

Receiving such a sudden reprimand, Jiang Shen almost didn't know how to react. "W-what opinions?"

Liu Xingzhi asked sternly, "Did *Shifu* tell you that you can't be my supporting lead?"

Jing Luoyun's eyes widened. She clearly did not believe him, and also turned to look at Jiang Shen. "Is that true?"

"No, that's not it…" Jiang Shen looked at them both. A little anxious, he could only say, "*Shixiong*'s 'first dance' is a very important performance. *Shifu* said that I'm still young, and I have no experience with such grand performances, so he wants me to take it slow…"

Liu Xingzhi said mockingly, "How is sixteen young?! You already have someone you like, and you're even planning to dance *Swan Lake* for him! Why?! Am I wronging you to make you be my supporting lead?!"

"*Aiyah*, that's different," Jiang Shen said quietly, blushing, "being *Shixiong*'s supporting lead is one thing. I've liked this person since I was young. That's different, *Shixiong."*

Question marks appeared all over Liu Xingzhi's face.

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Liu Xingzhi was so furious, his lungs felt as though they were about to burst. However, he could not bear to scold this little junior of his too badly, so he could only force him to learn the part of his supporting lead role. If word got out that he, the reputable Principal Liu, actually had to plead with someone to take on the role of his supporting lead, it would truly be embarrassing.

As long as Jiang Shen could dance, he felt that it was something to be delighted and happy about. He did not find it tough or tiring, and everyday, Liu Xingzhi

whipped him into shape mercilessly.

He had always been a fast learner, and not more than a few days later, he was already very familiar with the parts of the supporting lead.

After finding out, Shen Junyi was both helpless and resigned. With Liu Xingzhi's completely rebellious attitude, despite being his teacher, he could neither scold nor hit him, so he could only close his eyes and pretend not to see.

Other than Liu Xingzhi's 'first dance', another major thing was about to happen at Laiyi. In Ren Hui's words, an 'ancestor' was coming back.

Jing Luoyun was the first to hear about it, and when she arrived at the studio the next day, she immediately shared the news with Jiang Shen.

"Who is the ancestor?" Jiang Shen asked curiously. "How come I've never met them before?"

"He's actually our second boss, and is normally overseas. He no longer dances, and rarely choreographs as well. *Shifu* cares about him the most, and always goes along with whatever the ancestor wants."

Liu Xingzhi was clearly much more interested in gossip. "The name of the dance studio, Laiyi, comes from both his name and *Shifu*'s, and the tradition of dancing *Swan Lake* also started from his time. I heard that when our *shifu* was young, he too had sunken deep into an unrequited, angst-filled romance, so even now, he still cannot let go of this ancestor of ours."

Jiang Shen was young. Hearing about love and relationships, he only felt that it was very romantic. As for how true the gossip was, it did not matter at all.

That day, Shen Junyi asked him to stay back after practice. Liu Xingzhi thought he was finally willing to let Jiang Shen become his supporting lead, and was quite happy. Privately, he kept reminding Jiang Shen, "Dance well. Do you still remember all the things I pointed out to you before?"

Jiang Shen replied earnestly, "I do."

Liu Xingzhi looked rather pleased as he ruffled his hair. "Good boy."

Shen Junyi watched as Jiang Shen changed into his ballet shoes, then stood before him. With a complicated expression, he sighed, but still said, "Go on, dance first."

Jiang Shen nodded. To the side, Ren Hui played the music. When the drums started, Jiang Shen leapt up into the first grande jeté.

The youth in front of the mirror extended both arms out into the air. The melody from the horsehead fiddle rose and fell, and Jiang Shen's steps were like the blooming branches of plum blossom on the grasslands. With his waist bent, he spun around, and it seemed as though a pair of lively wings grew from his shoulder

blades.

Halfway through watching, Ren Hui was already choked up with emotion, tears filling her eyes. She turned to look at Shen Junyi, but froze when her eyes laid on him.

Jiang Shen's final pirouette was incredibly difficult. Balancing on his left foot, he completed eight spins. His face was drenched in sweat, and he was immersed entirely in the dance. Even when the music stopped, he was unable to pull himself out.

Shen Junyi remained silent for a long time. A little exhausted, he lifted his hand, covering his reddened eyes.

Jiang Shen finally returned to himself. Anxiously, he awaited Shen Junyi's comments.

"When you're dancing," Shen Junyi asked hoarsely after a moment, "what are you thinking about?"

Jiang Shen took a while to consider the question seriously, then said, "*Shixiong* told me about his grasslands before — the green fields under the snow of early spring, the newborn colts, the gamey smell of mutton, the colorful flags, as well as the Mongolian yurts and wrestling."

Shen Junyi nodded. He said, "Two years ago, I asked you: why do you dance?"

Jiang Shen nodded hesitantly, his brows knitting together slowly. "*Shifu*, you told me that my 'like' was worthless, but I've been thinking about it for the past two years, and my answer is still the same."

Shen Junyi opened his mouth, but did not speak, listening as Jiang Shen continued.

"I've also asked my seniors about it. They said that when they dance, they rarely think about anything else. Dancing is dancing. It's freedom, it's the sky, and it's like a dream." Jiang Shen tried to look for the right words to say. He was a little disheartened and self-reproachful. "However, I can't do that. When I dance, I just think about what I like — the things I like, and the people I like."

He looked up at Shen Junyi, his gaze somewhat lost. "Does this mean I don't have a free soul, so I'm unable to become a good dancer?"

To Shen Junyi, such an experiential way of dancing was a dangerous gift. He had seen such people become the greatest, most talented dancers, but he had also seen those who had lost their souls in the end.

The pointe of ballet — not only did it stand upon the souls of others, it also stood upon the souls of the dancers themselves.

"As long as you're willing, your soul is still free." Shen Junyi lowered his head, looking straight at Jiang Shen. Slowly, he said, "My hope is that you don't just dance because you like it. I want you to have an even deeper love and passion for dancing, because, if one day, something more important than dancing appears in your life…" He faltered, and did not continue.

Jiang Shen still looked clueless.

"Forget it, I'm in no position to say all this." Shen Junyi smiled a little self-deprecatingly. He asked Jiang Shen, "I heard you've been practicing *Swan Lake* recently?"

Jiang Shen had never ever considered that his usually stern, proper teacher would also gossip, and his face immediately turned a bright red. Hesitating, he made a sound of acknowledgement.

Shen Junyi once again sighed, his head aching. In the end, he could not help himself, and reprimanded him, "You all like to fall in love early, huh?"

Jiang Shen blinked, and spoke carefully, "I'm already sixteen. Some of the new juniors are a couple of years younger than me, yet they're already going to school hand-in-hand with their girlfriends."

Shen Junyi was left speechless.

Once the dance assessment was done, Shen Junyi didn't seem to have anything against Jiang Shen taking the supporting lead role anymore. In the end, he only said to Liu Xingzhi icily, "This is the supporting lead you picked yourself. If he happens to overshadow you at your 'first dance', don't come crying to me!"

Liu Xingzhi said, proud and conceited, "He's nowhere near that level yet."

Shen Junyi could not be bothered to deal with this idiot student of his. He turned to Jiang Shen, saying quietly, "Ai Lai will be coming in a few days. He's your Second *Shifu*, and in the future, he'll be teaching you some of the more detailed aspects about ballet."

Jiang Shen recalled the gossip about love and romance that Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun had shared before. He was itching with curiosity, yet dared not ask; however, his hesitation and yearning was completely exposed on his face.

Shen Junyi glanced at him suspiciously. "What's wrong?"

Jiang Shen mustered up his courage, and asked frankly, "*Shifu, is Second Shifu* your boyfriend?"

At a loss for words, Shen Junyi's face turned dark, as he scolded harshly, "Who told you that?!"

Standing to the side, Liu Xingzhi could not help but hide his face, cursing this junior of his for being truly useless. Silently, he thought, *Foolish swan! Don't you know that gossip is gossip, and should never be mentioned to the people involved?!*

Because of Little Swan, the gossip about the 'one-sided, tragic love' was savagely nipped in the bud by one of the main characters, Shen Junyi. Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun were scolded fiercely by their teacher for 'teaching children all the wrong things'. As soon as they walked out, they caught Jiang Shen and knuckled his head hard.

"*Aiyah*, please forgive me, I was wrong, I was wrong." Jiang Shen finally managed to free his head from their grip. "I thought everyone knew about it."

Liu Xingzhi said in a huff, "Even if everyone knows, you still can't say it out loud! It's so awkward!"

Jiang Shen asked, "So, is it true or not?"

Jing Luoyun laughed. "If you have the guts, why don't you ask the ancestor once he's here today?"

Jiang Shen thought about it. Judging by the attitude of everyone at the studio, the ancestor must be someone with a bad temper. If he was even fiercer than Shen Junyi… then he definitely wouldn't dare to ask.

"How's your *Swan Lake* coming along?" On average, Liu Xingzhi asked this once every three days, afraid that Jiang Shen's 'confession' would delay the progress of his 'first dance'. "When will you be done with it?"

Everything was fine if *Swan Lake* wasn't mentioned, but the moment it was, Jiang Shen had a new headache. "*Shifu* asked me about it yesterday as well, wondering whether I was practicing *Swan Lake*."

Liu Xingzhi said, "Even our esteemed *shifu* is concerned about this?"

Jiang Shen nodded. "After *Shifu* watched me dance yesterday, he said a lot of things. Something about 'what if there's something more important than dancing in my future… What will I do?'"

Jing Luoyun did not really understand either. "What does that mean?"

Jiang Shen sighed heavily. After a while, he said, "Actually, I'm scared as well. What if I finish the dance, and the person I like doesn't understand or accept it, what will I do?"

"For the first time, I feel like dancing is not something that can always be joyful." Wringing his shoes, he looked down, saying softly, "When the feet hurt, the heart will hurt as well."

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A while ago, Bai Jinyi had submitted an official application through his management company to the boxing organization in the United States. At the same time, Su Fang also reduced the number of his national matches, and started discussions with boxing gyms and clubs overseas.

"Your parents' intentions are to just buy a club." Su Fang handed some documents over to Bai Jinyi. "That way, we'll have our own management company along with our own boxing club, so it'll be very convenient for your training."

"I want to train at Mayweather's club." Bai Jinyi ripped the tape with his teeth, wrapping it around his hand. "Senbu has already introduced me to them, and Mayweather will be my new coach."

Su Fang exclaimed in surprise. "'The Undefeated King' Mayweather? Senbu truly does have some connections."

Bai Jinyi did not seem to feel any pride or glory in having been approved by the 'King of Boxing'. Only boxing and boxing matches were important to him.

"You still have a magazine interview tomorrow evening." Su Fang checked his schedule. "It's to celebrate your win at the National Middleweight Youth Championship."

Bai Jinyi expressed his impatience. "What's there to celebrate?"

Su Fang shrugged. "Who told you to be the youngest champion ever in the history of boxing? Also, it's no secret that you're about to enter the American boxing circuit."

Bai Jinyi was noncommittal about it. He did a few warmups, pulled on his gloves, and was about to start practicing with the reflex ball while Su Fang stood by the side, watching him.

Within just a few years, Bai Jinyi's height had already shot past 180cm, and his weight was maintained perfectly within the middleweight class range. He was covered with lean, shapely muscle from head and toe, without a trace of fat or anything extra.

His appearance had always been exquisite since he was young, and as the years passed, he grew into his facial features, looking even more handsome and attractive. It was no wonder that every time a magazine interviewed him, they would always print a large, clear photo of his face. Even when his face was injured, it did not hurt his demeanor at all. In fact, it only made it more charming.

Su Fang admired his beauty for some time, then suddenly seemed to remember something and asked casually, "So, have you told Jiang Shen that you'll be going to the States within the next two years yet?"

The day before the return of Laiyi's 'ancestor', the dance studio was at its busiest. Even Liu Xingzhi, who normally did no chores, stayed back to help clean the studio. As Jiang Shen mopped the floor, he couldn't help but ask his senior, "Has the ancestor returned before?"

Liu Xingzhi thought for a moment. "In my memory, only once; however, he stayed just for a few days before leaving. During those days, *Shifu*'s mood was even worse than usual. In any case, you best prepare yourself."

Those words left Jiang Shen very worried, and he no longer felt any anticipation for the meeting that was happening the next day.

"Go back and work harder on your *Swan Lake*," Liu Xingzhi reminded him again. "It's only a confession. If you're a man, you can't be afraid. So what if you fail? There are plenty of other fish in the sea!"

"That's different. I only like one person, and it's him." Jiang Shen pouted at Liu Xingzhi. "*Shixiong*, you only like money. That's too vulgar."

Liu Xingzhi was speechless.

When Jiang Shen returned to the Bai family mansion after classes that day, the first thing he did was to look for Bai Jinyi.

He poked his head into the gym, waiting for quite some time. When Bai Jinyi finally glanced over, he grinned happily. "You're still training?"

Bai Jinyi held the punching bag, frowning. "Just some casual practice. Are you hungry?"

Jiang Shen shook his head. He walked over to Bai Jinyi, wanting to be even closer to him, so he decided to just sit down right by the punching bag.

"Don't sit there, the punching bag might accidentally hit you."

"It's fine, I'm tough."

Bai Jinyi held his laughter back, crouching down in front of Jiang Shen. "So what did you do today?"

Jiang Shen counted on his fingers. "I can be the supporting lead in *Shixiong*'s 'first dance' now, and tomorrow, there will be a very important person coming to the studio to teach me ballet." He glanced at Bai Jinyi and said a little shyly, "I practiced *Swan Lake* too."

Bai Jinyi asked, "How's that coming along?"

Jiang Shen said mysteriously, "I'm not telling you. If I do, it won't be romantic."

Bai Jinyi finally laughed. He grabbed Jiang Shen's hand, pulling him up from the ground. "Then I won't ask anymore. Come, let's go have dinner."

Jiang Shen had yet to read the boxing magazine that had been delivered that day. While eating, he flipped through each page carefully, and as expected, came across an article about Bai Jinyi.

Ignoring how he had yet to finish his food, Jiang Shen ran upstairs to grab his notebook, scissors, and glue. Happily, he cut the 'tofu block' out carefully.

"This century's youngest, fiercest upcoming star — having claimed his first gold belt, would Bai Jinyi's fists ever stop? Of course not, he's still on his way to becoming a legend."

When Jiang Shen finished reading the article, he suddenly remembered something and asked anxiously, "Did you bring your gold belt home? Where is it?"

Biting into his chicken, Bai Jinyi said nonchalantly, "It's by your pillow."

Jiang Shen giggled for a while, then continued to read other 'tofu blocks'. "Recently, we've interviewed Bai Jinyi's manager, Ms. Su Fang. She revealed that Bai Jinyi would be progressing onto even more professional, international platforms, and that he had already received an invitation from the club owned by 'The Undefeated King' Mayweather. This gold belt champion, who had never tasted defeat in his entire professional boxing career, will take on the role of Bai Jinyi's new coach. In the next two years, Bai Jinyi will be training in the States…" Jiang Shen suddenly stopped when he read this. Frowning, he read it again. "In the next two years… the States…"

"Stop looking at it," Bai Jinyi interrupted, "it's all a bunch of nonsense."

Jiang Shen looked up at Bai Jinyi dazedly. He stammered, a little nervous, "I-is it really nonsense?"

Bai Jinyi remained silent for a bit, and finally said, "I won't be going to the States that soon." He looked at Jiang Shen, smiling softly as he tilted his head, asking, "But if I really did leave, could you bear to let me go?"

The weather in September had cooled down quite a lot. Bai Jinyi did not turn on the air conditioning, and was looking through the documents Su Fang gave him, sitting by his bed. Reading very seriously, he did not hear his door being pushed open until he noticed two bare feet in his line of sight.

Hugging his pillow, Jiang Shen stood in front of Bai Jinyi and said, a little embarrassed, "Let's sleep together."

Bai Jinyi scooted over. "Why aren't you wearing any shoes?"

Jiang Shen climbed nimbly into the bed. "It's not cold."

Reaching out, Bai Jinyi squeezed his toes. Jiang Shen dodged him, laughing, “It tickles…”

“Wear your shoes next time.” Bai Jinyi put the documents aside, following him into the bed as well. He shook the thin blanket out, covering both him and Jiang Shen.

“I can’t sleep.” Jiang Shen lay on his side, facing Bai Jinyi. His breaths were moist, and seemed to be sweetly scented.

Bai Jinyi did not speak, only listening quietly.

Jiang Shen said softly, “I can’t bear for you to go to the States.”

Bai Jinyi’s eyes fell to his face. “I won’t be going right now.”

Jiang Shen mumbled, “I won’t be able to bear it in the future either.” He sniffled. “I won’t be able to bear it ever.”

Bai Jinyi leaned in closer, reaching out and touching Jiang Shen’s face.

Jiang Shen closed his eyes. Like a baby bird, he nuzzled into his hand obediently.

Bai Jinyi did not pull his hand back. He could not help but lower his head, and just as he was about to make contact with the tip of the other boy’s nose, Jiang Shen suddenly opened his eyes.

Surprised, Bai Jinyi pulled back a little.

Jiang Shen’s gaze was clear, bright, and shiny as he looked at him, not noticing anything strange.

Bai Jinyi sighed, his expression complicated.

Jiang Shen was puzzled.

Bai Jinyi mumbled, “You’re so stupid…”

Frowning, Jiang Shen thought for a while, then said, feeling wronged, “I’ve never been smart in the first place.”

Bai Jinyi froze, and could not help but laugh again. “Then how do you know that you can’t bear for me to go?”

Jiang Shen’s face reddened. Grabbing Bai Jinyi’s hand, he said, “I just know.”

He didn’t seem to know what else he could say, and repeated a few times a little incoherently, “Because it’s you, I know. I’ll miss you, and I’ll be sad.”

Jiang Shen didn't know when he fell asleep, but when he woke again, Bai Jinyi was still lying next to him, holding his hand tightly.

Jiang Shen could not stop the blood from rushing to his face, yet he could not bear to let go immediately, so rustling under the blanket, he snuggled further into the other boy's arms.

Bai Jinyi did not wake up, and Jiang Shen only let go after he had gotten enough cuddles. Carefully, he climbed out of bed.

As he was about to brush his teeth in the bathroom downstairs, Bai Jinyi walked in, looking as though he had yet to wake up.

"Morning," he glanced at Jiang Shen, greeting him as he held his grumpiness back.

Jiang Shen placated the boy by squeezing his toothpaste for him. "Here."

Bai Jinyi shoved the toothbrush into his mouth, staring at Jiang Shen's face. "Why are you smiling?"

"Your hair is sticking up." Jiang Shen wetted his hand. Due to his height, he could only reach the top of the other boy's head on tiptoe. He could not help but laugh. "You're so cute."

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. Lowering his head, he nuzzled into Jiang Shen's cheek and tickled him forcefully with his hair.

It made Jiang Shen very itchy, and he complained as he pushed him, laughing, "What are you doing?"

Bai Jinyi lifted his head, finally brushing his teeth while looking into the mirror. Expressionlessly, he looked at Jiang Shen through the glass, and said, muffled, "I'm acting cute, alright?"

Jiang Shen was at a loss for words.

★

Although he had managed to return to Bai Jinyi's bed that night, the next day, when Jiang Shen thought about the fact that Bai Jinyi was heading to the States, he still couldn't help but feel sad. Early in the morning, he headed to his practice room. After doing his warmups, he rehearsed his parts for the performance, but was still mulling over his sorrows.

His condition was so affected by his thoughts that Shen Junyi could not help but glance at him quite a few times throughout the day, frowning and calling out his name sternly.

When a commotion could be heard outside, Shen Junyi left to greet the newcomer. Jing Luoyun and Liu Xingzhi were both quite excited, and called out to Jiang Shen, “Come and see, the ancestor is here.”

Jiang Shen was not very interested, but didn’t want to dampen his seniors’ spirits. Three heads huddled behind the door, one on top of the next, watching as Ren Hui and Shen Junyi escorted a man up the stairs, one on either side of him.

“That’s the ancestor, our second *shifu*.” Jing Luoyun’s head was at the very top, looking down as she whispered.

Liu Xingzhi bundled up his dreadlocks hurriedly, nudging Jiang Shen’s head with his chin. “You’d better do your best to make us proud, don’t embarrass our *shifu.”*

Jiang Shen looked up at him, a little unhappily. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Shen Junyi was the first to notice the three of them. Waving at them, he turned to speak to the person next to him, “You’ve met Luoyun and Xingzhi before. They’ve grown up quite a bit.”

That man nodded. He was wearing a wide brim hat that was clearly meant for women, but it was not at odds with his appearance at all. He turned his face slightly, revealing a smooth and elegant jawline.

Shen Junyi continued, “This is my newest student, Jiang Shen.”

Jiang Shen walked forward. Shen Junyi pulled him closer, and introduced, “This is your second *shifu*, Ai Lai.”

Ai Lai did not speak. He raised his hand, removing his hat slowly.

He did not have the cool, handsome appearance of Shen Junyi, nor the soft, charming ambiguity of Zhou Luoxiang’s looks. All of Ai Lai’s features were just right, like his picturesque brows — if they were a tad deeper, they would have been too garish; a tad lighter, they would have been as plain as water.

It was not like Jiang Shen hadn’t met anyone with looks as good as Bai Jinyi before, but Ai Lai was good looking in an entirely different way.

He did not seem real; more like a beautiful, ethereal dream.

“Zhou Luoxiang showed me a video of this child dancing before,” Ai Lai said, his voice as smooth and pleasant as jade. He looked at Shen Junyi, smiling, “You’ve found a good seedling.”

Hearing Zhou Luoxiang’s name, Shen Junyi was clearly unhappy. “Why mention him?”

Ai Lai looked at him, saying mildly, “It’s all in the past now. You’re the only one who still remembers.”

Shen Junyi frowned, his tone sarcastic, “I have no choice, as a certain someone’s memory is just too poor.”

Ai Lai seemed to find him stubborn, and pursed his lips in disdain. Putting his hat back on, he looked at the children, and spoke genially, “I haven’t been back in a long time, let’s see how much you’ve improved.”

As soon as the words left Ai Lai’s mouth, Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun looked as though they were about to face a formidable enemy. Liu Xingzhi was so nervous that a film of sweat even covered his forehead. Jiang Shen looked completely confused. When he lay down on the floor, doing his warmups, he whispered, “Second *Shifu* isn’t fierce at all, he’s so gentle when he speaks.”

Jing Luoyun shot him a look, as though what she was currently experiencing was worse than death, and even her voice was more subdued than normal. “You’ll understand in a bit… Each time he comes back, all the students in the school cry for three days.”

Jiang Shen looked even more baffled.

Next to them, Liu Xingzhi added with a dark expression, “He scolds them to tears.”

Jing Luoyun sighed. “We don’t call him the ancestor for nothing. We really do need to treat him like an actual ancestor.”

Ai Lai sat in front of the full-length mirror. The expression on his face remained consistently gentle, and he would occasionally say something to Shen Junyi who was seated next to him. Jiang Shen really could not see how he was scary at all, until after Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun finished dancing their own parts, one after another.

“I already told you this five years ago.” Ai Lai had his arms crossed, staring straight at Liu Xingzhi. “Don’t land on the floor so hard, and you have to keep your toes pointed. It’s already been five years, how are you still a pig?”

Liu Xingzhi was at a loss for words.

Ai Lai laughed, “No, after so many years, even a pig would have better memory than you.”

Liu Xingzhi dared not object in the slightest, bowing his head and accepting the reprimand. Jing Luoyun trembled, uncertain of whether or not she would meet the same fate, wanting but unable to help Liu Xingzhi. After scolding Liu Xingzhi, Ai Lai went on to scold Jing Luoyun, starting from how her waist was not flexible enough, to how she danced like a marionette on strings, and how she was completely emotionless. Finally, he seemed to be tired from the scolding and

instructed Shen Junyi to pour him some tea.

"Jiang Shen," Ai Lai said mildly, "it's your turn."

With how brutally his seniors had been scolded, Jiang Shen held no hopes that he would be able to avoid it. Bracing himself, he stood in position. When the music started, he managed to get into the right state of mind very quickly, yet he had only danced a short portion when Ai Lai called to him to stop.

Panting, Jiang Shen did not understand which part he had danced wrong.

Ai Lai stared at him with narrowed eyes for a little while, then asked suddenly, "Did you just go through a heartbreak? What is this idiotic nonsense you were dancing?"

Jiang Shen was speechless.

They had all underestimated Ai Lai's ability to scold people.

The ancestor did not dance, the ancestor only scolded.

In the next half a month or so, the fifth floor was full of Ai Lai's 360 degrees, incessant, surround sound, machine gun-like scolding that never repeated itself. Everyone was living under immense pressure, and every day was filled with practicing, rehearsing, and scolding. Rinse and repeat, there was no end in sight.

Finally, when one of their regular training days was about to come to an end, the group of three lay down on the floor of the studio, their heads against one another, looking like computers that had crashed.

Liu Xingzhi felt as though his life was a living hell. "Why is he staying for so long this time? When is he leaving?"

Facing the ceiling, Jing Luoyun felt like she could barely breathe. Gloomily, she said, "The ancestor comes according to his whims, so he'll leave according to his whims…"

Out of the three of them, Jiang Shen was the most miserable. Almost everyday, Ai Lai would ask him — "Are you still heartbroken?", "Who do you like?Have you confessed?", "You still haven't managed to woo them yet? Why are you so useless?" In the end, not even his seniors could bear watching it any longer, and asked him in secret, "Have you performed your *Swan Lake* yet?"

Lying on the floor, Jiang Shen did not want to move at all. After some time, he finally said weakly, "I probably won't be able to do it anymore…"

Liu Xingzhi turned to look at him, "Why? They don't want you already?"

Jiang Shen closed his eyes, looking very pitiful. "That's not it… They're about to go overseas…"

Lying next to him, Jing Luoyun nudged him with her elbow. “So what if they go overseas? You’ll have lots of opportunities to travel in the future as well. You should confess first. For all you know, you might succeed.”

“Really?” Jiang Shen lifted his head, finally gaining some hope. He asked longingly, “I can go overseas too?”

Liu Xingzhi said, “Everyone who wants to compete has to go overseas at some point. I’ve already been to Europe so many times; the only issue is that their food’s a little lacking.”

“Europe…” Jiang Shen murmured, “That’s not the United States…”

Jing Luoyun could not help but be nosy. “The United States? The person you like is going to the States?”

“Mn,” Jiang Shen said, and he sighed a few times, frustrated. “I’ll think about it some more.”

Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun still had to attend rehearsals, so Jiang Shen stayed back to tidy up the room alone. He knelt, wiping the floor, and just as he was about to pack his dance shoes, he suddenly heard someone speak up behind him. “You’re not leaving yet?”

Jiang Shen turned. Seeing that it was Ai Lai, his headache returned. “Second *Shifu*,” he said cautiously, “I’m just about to leave.”

Ai Lai did not say anything. Removing his shoes, he walked in, barefoot. Jiang Shen looked down, and just so happened to see a huge scar on the back of his left ankle.

“I tore my Achilles tendon.” Ai Lai noticed Jiang Shen’s gaze and gently shook his foot, unconcerned. “The Olympic Champion, Liu Xiang, has this issue too.”

Jiang Shen did not know what to say, so he could only remain on his knees, stiff and proper.

“This is a very common issue for athletes and dancers, so we have to be careful when training.” Ai Lai seemed to be recalling his memories. “At that time, I was young and impetuous. Despite knowing that I wasn’t as talented as Shen Junyi, I refused to accept it. I went overboard in my training, and this was the price I had to pay.”

Jiang Shen once again remembered all the gossip traveling around Laiyi about love and romance. He sneaked a peek at Ai Lai, and even with the goading of his seniors, having experienced all the gunfire over the past few weeks, he did not have the guts to ask at all.

Ai Lai shot him a look, seemingly very aware of what he was thinking. “Are you curious about the relationship between Shen Junyi and I?”

Jiang Shen never thought he would be exposed so easily, and flushed in embarrassment as he made an honest sound of admission.

Ai Lai was amused. “No wonder Shen Junyi likes you. You really are quite adorable.”

Speechless, Jiang Shen thought, *What use is being adorable, when you still scold me everyday…*

Resting his chin in his hand, Ai Lai thought for a moment. “So have you confessed to the person you like already or not?”

“Not yet,” Jiang Shen had no choice but to say, “I’ve only just finished learning *Swan Lake*, and haven’t found the right timing yet…”

“Oh, *Swan Lake*.” Ai Lai was a little surprised. After a moment, he seemed to understand. “That’s truly Shen Junyi’s style. That thing about Laiyi’s tradition or whatever, he’s the only one who would continue holding onto it, so traditional and old fashioned.”

Jiang Shen looked confused.

“Shen Junyi has probably asked you why you dance, right?”

Jiang Shen nodded.

“How did you answer him?”

Jiang Shen answered falteringly, “I said… because I like it.”

Ai Lai waited for a little while, then his eyes widened. “That’s it?”

Jiang Shen replied frankly, “That’s it.”

Ai Lai was at a loss for words.

Jiang Shen remained silent.

The two of them stared at each other, and Ai Lai finally could not help but burst into laughter. He laughed so hard, his eyes were red. As he wiped the tears away, he said, gasping for air, “No wonder Shen Junyi wants me to come back to teach you.”

Jiang Shen frowned, gazing at him, not understanding.

Ai Lai exhaled. His eyes were gentle, like the soft, wavy water grass at the bottom of a lake. “When I was around your age, I already knew that Shen Junyi was

a technical genius. He was able to think about nothing, focusing only on dancing. No matter what he danced, it was like from a textbook, a perfect example."

"At first, I imitated him, regarding him as my goal. I thought that was how I should be." Ai Lai gestured. "But I realized I couldn't. I would never be able to catch up to him."

Ai Lai said, "I simply just liked to dance."

"People are emotional beings, and my emotions were too rich. When I danced, I was never able to be like Shen Junyi, completely absorbed in nothing but the dance itself. I liked dancing, I liked the fans who were infatuated with me, I liked my dance partners, and at the beginning, I even liked him."

Ai Lai was silent for a long time, before he continued, "But Shen Junyi is an idiot. My 'like', to him, was worthless."

Jiang Shen called out, "Second *Shifu*." He wanted to explain on behalf of Shen Junyi, but was cut off by Ai Lai.

"I'm not that faithful," Ai Lai laughed, "he rejected me, so I moved on to others. When I dance, I need to be able to feel the dance itself, and I fell in love with many of my various dance partners. So, in the end, I wasn't even certain if my feelings for him came from the dance, or if it was truly only for him."

Jiang Shen shook his head, saying determinedly, "I'm very faithful. I only like one person."

"Then tell them," Ai Lai said calmly, looking at Jiang Shen, "Shen Junyi doesn't love me, but once upon a time, he had tried his hardest to save me. After my surgery to repair my Achilles tendon, he changed the name of this studio to Laiyi, turning my performance of *Swan Lake* for him into tradition. He did this in the hopes of giving me a response, to allow me to find my feelings in dance, and to stand on the stage again. But I failed."

Ai Lai's lips curved into a self-mocking smile as he said mildly, "I couldn't find a home for my soul. After truly possessing the so-called free spirit of dancers, I completely, entirely lost my passion for dancing instead."

"And so," he held Jiang Shen's hand, speaking softly and sincerely, "your 'like' is unimaginably priceless. No matter what, never lose sight of it."

★

As expected, one should never easily believe the rumors about love and romance going around Laiyi. The one-sided, angsty, deep love involving Shen Junyi was not so simple after all. After Ai Lai's rare moment of gentleness, he still went back to scolding people however he liked the very next day, the only exception being he no longer scolded Jiang Shen anymore.

Shen Junyi watched Jiang Shen's rehearsal and didn't have much to say, as though he was able to guess what Ai Lai had said to him.

"There are actually twenty words in Laiyi's school motto." Shen Junyi sat down cross-legged in front of Jiang Shen after class. "With constant diligence, your efforts will not be in vain. I was the one who wrote those ten."

Jiang Shen nodded. "We have to be diligent and hardworking at all times, and we cannot slack off or neglect our training for even a moment. That way, our efforts and hard work will not be in vain."

Shen Junyi chuckled. His long, phoenix eyes seemed to always put others at a distance, but when he smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkled warmly. "Ai Lai wrote the other ten words."

"Wherever your heart goes, your love will find a home," Shen Junyi continued, "the things he did not achieve, and could not overcome, he hopes that you can. Dancing is simultaneously your everything, but also not your everything; I hope you can understand that."

In the middle of October, Shen Junyi approved Jiang Shen for a ten day break. Ai Lai showed no signs of leaving at all, but before Jiang Shen's break, he coached Jiang Shen alone for a few days.

"You're a lot more talented than me," Ai Lai finally said, "and your emotions run deeper as well. Your love for dancing is pure and wide, unlike me, who was too frivolous."

Having spent more time with him, Jiang Shen knew that this man had a very sharp tongue, but he was no longer as afraid of him as he was before. As such, he asked bravely, "Then, will you ever like *Shifu* again?"

Ai Lai replied, his tone flippant and lazy, "If he lets me sleep with him, I'll like him."

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Ai Lai laughed uncontrollably. "What kind of expression is that? By the way, I heard that Zhou Luoxiang had reached out to you as well. Why didn't you accept him as your teacher?"

"Is Mr. Zhou better?"

Ai Lai did not reply, but told another story. "In the past, we were partners for a dance, and we were planning on competing in France. I was the lead dancer, and he was the support. On the eve of the competition, something went wrong with my Achilles tendon. Shen Junyi wanted to cancel our participation, postponing it to next year, and wait until I recovered. But Zhou Luoxiang did not listen to him. He took over my lead position, returning with a gold medal."

Jiang Shen came to a realization. “Is that why *Shifu* doesn’t like him?”

“At that time, I had already been immersed in self-doubt for a long time, having been unsuccessful in both dancing and romance. After my surgery, I could no longer dance.” Ai Lai did not seem to be upset when he said this, as though he were talking about someone else. “To be fair, Zhou Luoxiang did not do anything wrong. Dance competitions are all about the survival of the fittest, and incidents of the supporting role replacing the lead role at the last second happen commonly in many big dance troupes. After all, the spotlight on the two roles is very different, so it’s completely understandable. Shen Junyi is just stubborn about it.”

Ai Lai made a gesture. “He thinks that was the last straw that broke me.”

Jiang Shen glanced at him, saying softly but stubbornly, “If *Shixiong* was unable to dance the lead role, I wouldn’t be dancing it either.”

Ai Lai froze, and could not help but laugh. “You’re definitely Shen Junyi’s student. Zhou Luoxiang seeks honor and glory above all else; he’s not suitable for you.”

“You don’t even know,” Ai Lai leaned into Jiang Shen’s ear, wickedly sharing some gossip, “Zhou Luoxiang’s office is filled with all the medals and trophies he’s ever won. If you step inside, you’ll be blinded by all that glory.”

Jiang Shen did not know what to say in response.

Suddenly getting so many days off, Jiang Shen did not know what to do with the time. After he told Bai Jinyi, the other boy did not seem to have any opinions, but arranged to take a break as well. Even Su Fang could not help but tease them. “Your relationship is really too good. Don’t you guys get sick of each other, stuck together all day long?”

“Why would we get sick of each other?” Bai Jinyi arranged his boxing gloves neatly. “Don’t let my parents come looking for me. Just tell them I went out to have some fun.”

Su Fang said, “Madam will definitely ask me where you are going. What should I tell her?”

Bai Jinyi shot her a look. “Just tell her I’m going on my honeymoon. Disturbing a newlywed couple is something that is punishable by the heavens.”

Su Fang was speechless.

Lying on his bed, Jiang Shen was video calling Tan Lingling. He tried his best to show his entire upper body on the screen. “Do you think I grew taller?”

Tan Lingling was rather impatient. “Didn’t you already ask me to take a look last time? Are you looking to grow into a giant within a few days?”

Jiang Shen's face fell. "Don't you guys miss me?"

"Chen Maoxiu and the others do miss you quite a bit," Tan Lingling said, "when Shen Shubao heard that you were on break, he asked if you were coming back. If you are, he'll apply for leave in Beijing and come back to see you."

Two years ago, Shen Shubao had been accepted by a university, and became the only child in the village to study in Beijing. The day he received his acceptance letter, firecrackers were lit from the entrance of the village all the way to the gate of his yard. Even Chen Maoxiu had benefited from his association with him.

"Shubao-*ge* is going to come back?" Jiang Shen became excited immediately. "What about Goumao and Qingling-*zi*?"

Tan Lingling laughed. "They're all nearby, so they'll definitely come back and keep you company."

Jiang Shen thought for a moment. "Then is it ok if I bring Bai Jinyi back too?"

"*Aiyoh*, what are you saying? You've been troubling him so much. Nevermind Young Master Bai coming to our place, he can even come and be my son."

Jiang Shen laughed happily, hanging up. He went downstairs to look for Bai Jinyi. Standing by the stairs, he leaned down over the railing. "Bai Jinyi!"

Bai Jinyi had just finished showering, and had yet to put on a shirt. Poking his head out from the bathroom, he looked up. "What's up?"

Jiang Shen looked at the boy's very wet hair, and how it was still dripping with water. Smiling, he said, "Come back to my village with me!"

This was not the first time Jiang Shen had invited Bai Jinyi to his village, but they had never managed to find a time that worked for the both of them before. Now that they finally had an opportunity, of course Jiang Shen did not wish to leave him out.

The village had changed a lot. Other than fields of fruits and grains, the Jiang family even rented a fishpond. Starting last year, Chen Laoshi had started a farm stay business, and every time Goumao was on break, he would have to come back home to help. Qingling-*zi* was still taking art classes; she was preparing to apply to an art school, and the little girl was now a beauty. She was tall, slim and graceful, as well as extremely charming.

"Song Xin-*jiejie* was accepted into the business management program at Soochow University." Qingling-*zi* had come to the bus stop to pick up Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi. "Lai Song is now her senior, and he's in the physical education department."

Jiang Shen nodded. "I know."

He had always kept in touch with Song Xin, and during every winter and summer holiday, Song Xin would return to the Children's Center to teach the little kids dance. As for Lai Song, he had reclaimed his National Youth Heavyweight Championship title in his third year and final of high school. Song Xin had also attended that match — a dainty, fairy-like girl standing by the ringside, shouting and crying along with a bunch of stinky men. Her makeup was ruined, her hair in a disarray, and in the end, when Lai Song lifted the gold belt, he draped it across Song Xin's shoulders.

That year, the magazines even reported that they were a power couple in the world of sports, and wrote all sorts of nonsense about the interactions happening between them from when they were young. Then, within a few days, another report came out that the golden couple had gone their separate ways, and that they were never going to contact each other ever again. Who would have thought they would actually end up in the same university in the end.

Qingling-*zi* was very curious. "Are they still dating?"

Jiang Shen shook his head. "That, I don't know. In any case, Song Xin has never mentioned Lai Song to me before." He looked towards Bai Jinyi. "Do you know anything?"

This was Bai Jinyi's first time in a village, and all his attention was attracted by the gold, glimmering stalks of rice in the paddy fields. After quite some time, he finally peeled his eyes away, and asked, "Garbage Disposal Lai?"

Jiang Shen asked, "Don't you guys call each other often?"

"He's too annoying," Bai Jinyi frowned, speaking disdainfully, "Nine out of ten phone calls would be about Xinxin-*mei*. I ended up blocking him."

Both Jiang Shen and Qingling-*zi* were at a loss for words.

Recently, to help with his family's business, Chen Maoxiu was learning to drive. He was very tanned from the sun, and as he stood at the village entrance, Jiang Shen could not even recognize him from far away. When they drew closer, Chen Maoxiu gestured at the top of Jiang Shen's head, a little gloomy. "Why are all you dancers so tall?"

Just as he finished speaking, he saw Bai Jinyi behind Jiang Shen.

Goumao looked up, speechless.

Bai Jinyi looked down slightly, and greeted, "Hello."

Goumao's smile was very stiff. "T-the boxers are the taller ones after all…"

Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan had renovated Jiang Shen's room. They redid the floors, and in order for Bai Jinyi to have somewhere to sleep, they also changed the single bed to one that was two meters wide.

Despite having people attending upon him since he was young, the friendliness of the villagers still surpassed Bai Jinyi's expectations.

Especially after Shen Shubao returned. Among the three families, he was the only one who was treated like a young master, asked to remain seated in the living room. Everyone else, man or woman, old or young, were all bustling about, slaughtering chickens and killing fish.

Jiang Shen seemed to be worried that he would be bored, and carried Tony inside to keep him company.

"At the very least, he's Bai'er's father," Jiang Shen said seriously, "you're all related, so you should cultivate your feelings for each other."

Wordless, Bai Jinyi looked down, his eyes meeting the big-tailed rooster's eyes at his feet.

With its head held high, Tony walked around in a circle, bobbing its neck as it pecked at Bai Jinyi's shoes.

Bai Jinyi endured its pecking for a while, then suddenly said to it icily, "These shoes cost 20,000RMB."

Tony glanced up at him, before lowering its head once more, continuing fearlessly.

Bai Jinyi was left speechless.

Since there were too many people, they decided to just gather in the yard for dinner. Around a dozen pairs of chopsticks fought to place food in Bai Jinyi's bowl, and despite his boxer's appetite, even if he had the will, he didn't have a way. He ate until he felt like his digestive system was filled all the way up to his throat, only for Tan Lingling to persuade him to have another bowl of old duck soup.

After dinner, there were not many exciting activities to do around the village. Qingling-*zi* still had a drawing to complete, and Goumao was called back to help out with the farm stay. Shen Shubao had rushed back from university, and despite being dead tired from traveling, he still helped slaughter the chickens, duck and fish. After dinner, he nearly fell asleep at the dining table, so he also headed back early to catch up on his sleep.

Seeing how much Bai Jinyi had eaten, Jiang Shen suggested, "Shall we go on a walk?"

They asked Tan Lingling for some change, and the two of them walked down the path amidst the fields. Unlike the city, the moon and stars out in the countryside were even brighter than the streetlights. Jiang Shen bought two popsicles, and they ate while walking to the rental bookstore.

The old man was still there, the bookstore yet to close. When he saw Jiang Shen, he adjusted his reading glasses and broke into a big smile. “Oh, you’re back?”

“*Yeye*,” Jiang Shen greeted, and Bai Jinyi followed suit. The two of them stood by the door, not going in.

The backscratcher by the old man’s hand was still the same one that Jiang Shen had gifted him a few years ago. It was rather old by now, the handle worn smooth.

“What are you looking at?” Jiang Shen poked his head into the door.

The old man had upgraded his old phone to a smartphone, and on his screen was Weibo. He hid his phone away, refusing to let Jiang Shen see. “I’m not looking at anything… Go out and play, why are you staying here?”

Jiang Shen looked at him suspiciously. Seeing how determined the old man was to hide his phone, he could only relent. “Then we’ll go and play now. *Yeye*, don’t close the shop too late, alright?”

“Got it, got it.” The old man shooed them away impatiently. When Jiang Shen was far away, he turned his phone back on, squinting as he signed in for the day on the super topic ‘The Little Swan Ecological Protection Center'.

The Jiang family’s rice had already been harvested, and the stalks lay spread across the fields, gleaming in golden patches. Jiang Luoshan had piled some of the stalks into a heap in the center of the field. Stepping down from the edge of the field, Jiang Shen turned back to look at Bai Jinyi, asking, “Do you want to come down?”

Bai Jinyi looked down at his shoes.

Jiang Shen said mischievously, “Take them off, they cost twenty thousand.”

Sitting on the edge, Bai Jinyi removed his shoes. “How did you know?”

“I heard you when you were whispering to Tony.”

Bai Jinyi rolled up his pants, holding his shoes in his hands. “It’s not that I worry about my shoes, it’s just that I don’t want to damage the fields.”

Jiang Shen was barefoot too. He walked ahead, holding Bai Jinyi’s hand.

The stalks were a little prickly, but they were thick and warm. Jiang Shen flattened out a space in front of the heap, before letting Bai Jinyi sit there. The two had their heads close together, looking up at the night sky, the light from the stars and moon scattering down on them.

“I’ve finished learning *Swan Lake,”* Jiang Shen said suddenly.

Bai Jinyi turned to look at him.

Jiang Shen stood up, bending forward and removing his shirt, then tying it around his waist. With his chest bare, he stood in front of Bai Jinyi. “I want to dance for you.”

Bai Jinyi sat up straight, a little uncertain of what Jiang Shen meant. “Right now?”

Jiang Shen smiled but did not respond, his feet forming the shape of a T. Then, looking straight into Bai Jinyi’s eyes, he bent over slowly.

For the rearranged *Swan Lake*, Jiang Shen only needed to dance the solo at the climax. Despite the golden rice stalks under his feet, and not wearing any dance shoes, his posture was still graceful and ethereal.

As Jiang Shen leapt up, his eyes connected with Bai Jinyi’s. His waist was flexible as he turned around powerfully. His arms were extended, like the wings of a swan, curving up above his head.

The ‘swan’ drew closer tentatively. The ‘prince’ reached out, wanting to touch those pure, white feathers, only to be nimbly avoided. After a few of these tentative movements, the ‘swan’ finally set down his pride and defence, elegantly and obediently kneeling down by the ‘prince’s feet.

After an unknown stretch of time, Jiang Shen finally lifted his head slowly.

His eyes were slightly red, his face covered in sweat, and the moonlight wrapped around the enchanting lines of his figure.

“Bai Jinyi.” Jiang Shen’s voice was slightly husky as he maintained his kneeling posture, his words soft and trembling, “I love dancing, just like how I love this rich, fertile earth, the joy of harvest, the drizzle in the mountains, and my friends and family.”

“But I love you even more.” He swallowed, each word clear and direct. “My soul is forever unable to be free, because it belongs to you.”

## Chapter 10 — Dreams Glowing Brightly

Bai Jinyi had a grand, wondrous dream. In it, he was standing in the spot he was most familiar with — the boxing ring. Beyond the ropes was a boundless, golden paddy field. Bai Jinyi remembered the book his mother once read to him as a child: in the golden paddy field, were foxes and roses.

He wanted to step outside the ring, but was stopped by the ropes. Looking up, he saw the starry sky above his head, and the biggest, brightest of them all was slowly falling towards him.

Without thinking, Bai Jinyi reached out, and that star landed directly within his arms, scorching his heart.

When Bai Jinyi woke up, his right hand was clenched in a fist tightly, pressing right where his heart was. He gasped for air, his ears filled with a low roaring. He felt as though he was resting on an autumn lake, the sweet scent of a sunlit paddy field wafting about his nose.

The early morning of the village was quiet and simple. Outside, only the occasional sound of running water could be heard. Bai Jinyi sat up, looking down at his palm. Jiang Shen was not next to him.

The towel and toothbrush had been prepared for him beforehand, and this was the first time in Young Master Bai's life that he brushed his teeth and washed his face out in an open yard. Looking a little clumsy, he squatted in front of the tap with a frown, constantly worried that the water would splash onto his slippers.

October's slight chill was expressed through the mountain mist. After washing his face, the first thing Bai Jinyi saw was Jiang Shen carrying a thermos into the yard.

When the two boys saw each other, they both froze for a moment.

"You're awake?" Jiang Shen was the first to speak. He was very shy, looking down before looking back up again. His ears turned even redder, but he still mustered up his courage, and took a few steps forward. Crouching down next to Bai Jinyi, he said, "I'll rinse your towel for you."

Bai Jinyi handed his towel over. Jiang Shen leaned closer to the tap, rinsing it out, then watched as Bai Jinyi wiped his face again.

Bai Jinyi asked, "Where did you go?"

Jiang Shen lifted the thermos. "Auntie Hua'er made some soy milk, and asked me to go grab some."

Bai Jinyi nodded. He did not continue speaking, but looked at Jiang Shen, the heat building gradually in his heart.

Throat dry, he swallowed, then reached out and grabbed the tips of Jiang Shen's fingers. He opened his mouth, finally saying, "Jiang Shen, I…"

“Why are you boys up so early?” Tan Lingling walked out, combing her hair, her voice bright and clear. “You brought the soy milk back?”

“Yes.” Jiang Shen stood up hurriedly.

Bai Jinyi’s palms were suddenly empty. The trace of coolness from Jiang Shen’s fingertips had disappeared. Clenching his fist, he frowned again, a little frustrated.

Tan Lingling asked him warmly, “Did you sleep well?”

Bai Jinyi nodded, covering his burning face with the cold towel as he mumbled, “Thank you, Auntie…”

“*Aiyoh*, what are you thanking me for? You’re my godson now.” She called the two in for breakfast. “I’ve made some savoury pancakes for you, have some before going out to play.”

The two boys had woken up too early, and their friends next door were still lazing in their beds. With full stomachs, they had nothing to do, so Jiang Shen could only take Bai Jinyi out for a stroll.

As always, Tan Lingling gave them some coins and candy, urging them, “Go have fun, do whatever you like, and buy whatever you want.”

Despite her words, there really wasn’t much to buy in the village. There were plenty of ripe mandarin orange and jujube trees around them. As long as they picked the fruits themselves, they could eat them. Jiang Shen climbed up a tree, plucking a few perfectly ripe mandarins, while Bai Jinyi looked up at him from the ground.

“Come down,” the boxing champion urged. He felt like he was being taken care of like a girl, coming here and not being able to do anything.

Lifting the hem of his shirt and using it as a basket, Jiang Shen made his way down slowly. “These are very sweet, make sure you eat lots.”

Bai Jinyi reached out, lifting Jiang Shen off the tree and setting him back down onto the ground halfway through his descent.

“Hey! My mandarins!” As he was being carried, some of the oranges rolled out of his shirt.

Still carrying him, Bai Jinyi did not let him get down. “Forget about them.”

Jiang Shen struggled for a little while before giving in somewhat reluctantly. “Alright.”

Although some of the oranges had fallen out, Bai Jinyi still did not put Jiang Shen back on the ground. Holding Jiang Shen in a princess carry, they left the

orchard. Jiang Shen peeled a mandarin while in his arms, separating a segment and placing it into Bai Jinyi's mouth.

"Is it sweet?" He asked.

Bai Jinyi nodded. "It is."

Jiang Shen's eyes crinkled as he smiled. He wanted to get down, so Bai Jinyi let him go unwillingly, grumbling, "It's not like you're heavy…"

Jiang Shen was a little embarrassed. "But I'm not a girl."

Bai Jinyi glanced at him, saying seriously, "I know you're not a girl."

Before this, Jiang Shen wasn't actually certain if Bai Jinyi was aware that a man could like another man. His feelings were passionate, yet innocent. From the moment he discovered he liked Bai Jinyi, he had never felt regret or pain over it, even when he felt lost.

Jiang Shen thought even if Bai Jinyi did not like him, it was fine. It was more than enough that he liked Bai Jinyi.

So much of his 'like' was poured into this one person. If Bai Jinyi was delighted, he was delighted, so if Bai Jinyi was happy, he would definitely be happy as well.

After picking mandarins, they went on to climb the mountain. Rather than calling the mountains to the south 'mountains', they should really be called hills, and wherever the grass grew, flowers bloomed all around.

Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi lay amongst the sea of flowers, their faces tilted up to the sky. The sun peeked through the leaves and branches of the trees, dots of light scattering across their faces.

Bai Jinyi suddenly said, "Little Swan."

Jiang Shen turned to look at him. Feeling lazy, his eyes were shut as he responded, "Hmm?"

"I know you're a boy." Bai Jinyi suddenly said out of nowhere. "I also know that a man can like another man."

Jiang Shen opened his eyes. He watched as Bai Jinyi turned, the boys now facing each other.

"I'm not like you. I only know how to box, and I'm brutish and ugly," said Bai Jinyi.

Jiang Shen objected softly, "No… You're very good looking."

Bai Jinyi chuckled, saying helplessly, "Let me finish."

Jiang Shen nodded, falling silent.

Through the skullcap blossoms, Bai Jinyi threaded his fingers between Jiang Shen's, his palms warm and sweaty.

"To me, you're like the stars in the sky." Bai Jinyi took a deep breath and said slowly, "You fell from the sky, right into my arms."

He looked up directly into Jiang Shen's eyes. "I want to hide you inside my heart. Would you be willing?"

Jiang Shen's eyes widened. Momentarily, he was unable to react, until Bai Jinyi leaned in closer.

The boy propped himself up onto his arms. Lowering his head, his gaze fell onto Jiang Shen's face. He blocked off the sunlight, and the dappled shadows of the trees were no longer visible. Jiang Shen only felt warmth on his lips, and Bai Jinyi's long eyelashes brushing softly against his lids.

He kissed him.

In the refreshing breeze of the mountains, under the light and shadows, in the sea of flowers.

Pressed against his lips, Bai Jinyi said suddenly, his voice low, "Jiang Shen, for you, I can stay and not go to the United States."

Jiang Shen clearly hadn't recovered from the kiss yet. With a red face, he asked reflexively, "Why are you not going…?"

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. "I thought you couldn't bear for me to go?"

"I-it's true, I can't…" He was a little anxious and frowned. "B-but…"

Propping his head up with an arm, Bai Jinyi held out a finger, placing it on Jiang Shen's lips. Then he leaned forward again, trailing kisses from his forehead to his eyes, nose, and cheeks.

"I like you more than anything else." Bai Jinyi smiled widely. "I love you, Little Swan."

★

Although he did not have the slightest bit of romantic experience, Jiang Shen had at least seen other people in love. Laiyi had never restricted their students from being in relationships, so Jiang Shen had witnessed the various ways young couples interacted with each other, from holding each other's hands to kissing on the lips. Bai Jinyi, on the other hand, grew up amongst rough, brash boys. Nevermind romantic experience, ever since he was young, Bai Jinyi's ideas of love had been formed and crystallized solely through his feelings for Jiang Shen.

The two of them could not display too much affection with each other in the village. Of course, the most important reason was because they never got any chance to do so.

Goumao asked Chen Laoshi specially for leave just to hang out with Jiang Shen. Qingling-*zi* was not so fortunate, and had to go to school. Once Shen Shubao caught up on sleep, he came to the Jiang's place before noon and ate lunch with the two boys.

There were free-range eggs, chickens, and ducks, as well as fresh shrimps and carps from the river. Although Bai Jinyi ate a lot, he still had to control his weight. Seeing this, Shen Shubao could not help but exclaim, "You athletes sure have it hard."

Jiang Shen said, "It's fine once you get used to it. Bai Jinyi's alright; I put on weight too easily."

Shen Shubao laughed. "What do you mean 'put on weight too easily'? You're so thin."

The three boys finished their lunch and went out to look for Goumao. It was currently the time to harvest the last of the hairy crabs, and all the adults were busy working by the lake. Shen Shubao suggested bringing Bai Jinyi over to watch. That way, they would be able to eat the freshest hairy crabs possible too.

Holding a net, Goumao asked them, "Do you guys want to get in the water?"

Bai Jinyi did not understand, his brows knitting together. "Get into what water?"

Jiang Shen explained, "The fish ponds. Some are very shallow, and you can just scoop the crabs up directly." He thought for a moment, then continued, "Song Xin had gone in to catch crawfish before. I sent you photos, remember?"

Bai Jinyi remembered that photo of a bunch of wild lunatics rolling about in the mud, and his face darkened visibly. His desire to keep himself looking good was even greater than his obsession with details. To let himself become so unkempt in front of Jiang Shen, he would rather die.

"It's lots of fun. Just put on the wader pants, and you can go play all you want in the water," Shen Shubao tempted him, "Don't worry, Goumao and I will both be there."

Bai Jinyi was still very hesitant. He glanced at Jiang Shen again, confirming once more, "I really won't get dirty?"

Jiang Shen consoled him assuredly, "Even if you get dirty, you'll still be the most handsome man in the world."

Bai Jinyi put on a pair of overall waders and a hat. He was already tall and muscular, and in this getup, he looked even more built. Jiang Shen wanted to take a photo of him, but Bai Jinyi's expression was very unhappy.

"Give me a smile," Jiang Shen said, "you look pretty good."

Bai Jinyi stuck the long handle of the net into the ground, saying stubbornly, "Nonsense."

Jiang Shen said, "It's true. In my eyes, you always look good no matter what."

He laughed, then added, "You're most handsome in the boxing ring."

"When I get hit, I'm not handsome anymore." Bai Jinyi held the net in his hand. "Every time I get injured, you look as though you're about to cry."

Jiang Shen sighed, "That's because my heart aches for you."

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. "Then I'm very happy that your heart aches for me."

Goumao and Shubao were a distance away, so they did not know what the two were talking about. Unlike Bai Jinyi, the kids born and bred in the village were not particular about going into the lake at all. All they did was roll up their pants and put on a pair of rain boots.

"We're going in," Goumao shouted from the bank. He and Shen Shubao slid into the lake, and with a scoop of their long nets, a few crabs came out of the water.

Already dressed like this, Bai Jinyi could not retreat at the last minute. With a stiff expression, he said, "Help me down."

Jiang Shen was about to die laughing. Holding onto Bai Jinyi's hand, he murmured, "You're like a lady getting into her bridal carriage."

Bai Jinyi glared at him but continued holding onto Jiang Shen's hand tightly, not letting go. With his arm outstretched, Jiang Shen led him carefully down into the pond, until Bai Jinyi finally stood firmly in the water.

"Just scoop wherever you want." Goumao swished his net as though stirring the mud. With a splash, he suddenly lifted his net up. The mud and water from the lake sprayed everywhere, and Bai Jinyi closed his eyes instinctively.

Five or six hairy crabs were scrambling about inside the net, waving their pincers, only a centimeter or so away from Bai Jinyi's face.

Bai Jinyi was shocked silent.

Goumao said excitedly, "These are all for you!"

Amongst all of them, Shen Shubao worked the hardest while saying the least, catching net after net of crabs. Bai Jinyi's getup was cumbersome, and along with his inexperience, after lifting his net over a dozen times, he only managed to scoop up about seven or eight crabs. For some reason, he insisted on tying a string around the legs of the crabs he caught before putting them into the straw basket.

When Qingling-*zi* returned in the evening, they had only just finished up for the day. Holding up the two baskets that he had caught, Goumao showed off the crabs to his sister. "There's more than enough for you tonight."

Qingling-*zi* said daintily, "You'll have to shell them for me."

Goumao slapped his chest. "No problem, once I've shelled them, they're all yours."

Shen Shubao had the most crabs. They decided to take them all and cook them over at Jiang Shen's place. After everything was cooked, Bai Jinyi picked at them carefully for some time.

"What's wrong?" Jiang Shen watched as Bai Jinyi picked out the ones with a string tied around their legs.

Bai Jinyi said, "These are all for you."

Jiang Shen laughed. "Aren't they all the same?"

"Of course not," said Bai Jinyi, "*I* caught these."

Raising his chin towards Jiang Shen, he commanded, "Eat."

Jiang Shen was speechless.

He did not really like crabs, so seven or eight of them were enough for Jiang Shen. Bai Jinyi was, after all, new to this, so he did not know which were male or female when catching them. At the end of October, the female crabs were no longer filled with roe, but the crab fat in the males was not too bad. Jiang Shen shelled the crab, dipped the meat in black vinegar and ginger, and savoured it slowly by himself.

Bai Jinyi glanced over at him numerous times. Finally, he could not help but ask, "Are they delicious?"

Jiang Shen's eyes were half-lidded in bliss from savouring the crabs, a smear of crab fat by the corner of his lips. "Of course they're delicious," he said while shelling a few legs, dipping them in the ginger vinegar, then stuffing them into his mouth.

Bai Jinyi's mood seemed to have finally improved. He did not smile, but there was a soft look in his eyes. Reaching out, he wiped the corner of Jiang Shen's mouth with his thumb.

Jiang Shen gave him a questioning look.

Bai Jin's movements could not be more natural as he licked the crab fat off his thumb, saying mildly, "There was some on your face."

Blushing a little, Jiang Shen wiped his mouth again. "Oh," he said shyly.

Qingling-*zi* looked up just in time to witness this scene. At first, she froze, then looked at Bai Jinyi before turning to Jiang Shen. A little puzzled, she frowned, but before she could think about it more, Goumao placed a bowl full of crab meat in front of her.

"Eat up." Chen Maoxiu went to shell another crab. Generously, he said, "Richie Rich Bai, stop fussing over Jiang Shen, eat some yourself."

Bai Jinyi turned and was just about to pick a crab up when Shen Shubao pushed one that had already been shelled over to him.

"We'll shell them," Shen Shubao said gently, "you guys can just eat."

The younger ones could not eat fast enough to keep up with the shelling pace of the older two. Shen Shubao was basically a model worker and a human robot. He could even completely shell the tips of the big pincers.

"The skills of an engineering boy," Goumao complained, "he's probably spent too much time with machines."

Qingling-*zi* was quite envious. "Shubao-*ge*'s future girlfriend will definitely be very fortunate."

Chen Maoxiu asked, "Fortunate how… By shelling crabs for her?"

"Yup." Qingling-*zi* nodded, as though nothing could be more obvious. "Shelling crabs for your beloved is so romantic."

Shen Shubao adjusted his glasses. He shelled another crab, smiling a little slyly, "Other people don't get to eat my crabs so easily. Only you guys get the privilege."

Then he looked over at Jiang Shen. "If we're talking about what's really romantic, it would be the most romantic if Shen-*zi* had someone he liked, wouldn't it?"

Jiang Shen lifted his head a beat late, not knowing why he was suddenly mentioned, and asked, baffled, "Ah?"

Shen Shubao said, "When we engineering boys like someone, we'll just make a little trinket for them. If Shen-*zi* were to like someone, he would definitely dance for them. That'll look so much better than whatever us mortal boys can do."

“What about Richie Rich Bai?” Qingling-*zi* suddenly asked Bai Jinyi, curious. “If you liked someone, how would you express it? Would you take her to watch you box?”

“If they want to watch me box, they can do it anytime,” Bai Jinyi said mildly. He thought for a bit, then continued, “But there’s nothing nice to watch in a boxing match. It’s not as beautiful as dancing, and we get injured when we’re hit.”

Bai Jinyi’s gaze swept across Jiang Shen, mumbling, “They’ll even cry when they see the injuries.”

Jiang Shen buried his head in his crabs, the tips of his ears a little red.

Bai Jinyi looked over to Qingling-*zi*, saying solemnly, “I might not be as romantic as others, but when I like someone, I want to be their hero. I have to give them no less than my entire heart.”

Deep in autumn, the water in the yard was a little cold. Shivering, Jiang Shen brushed his teeth and washed his face, then carefully washed his feet as well before going back to his room.

Bai Jinyi was lying on the bed, frowning as he read some documents pertaining to his career. Seeing Jiang Shen come in, he lifted the blankets.

“Are you cold?” He asked. He waited for Jiang Shen to get into the bed, then warmed Jiang Shen’s feet.

Jiang Shen shook his head. “I’m not cold now.” He peeked towards Bai Jinyi’s computer, asking, “What are you looking at?”

Bai Jinyi did not hide it from him. “I’m looking at some professional boxing clubs within the country.”

Jiang Shen blinked, not saying a word.

Bai Jinyi continued reading for a little while, only to hear Jiang Shen calling his name softly, “Bai Jinyi.”

Bai Jinyi looked down at him.

After a long bout of silence, Jiang Shen finally continued, “You should go to the States.”

Bai Jinyi narrowed his eyes. He did not agree or refuse. Shutting his computer down, he lay down next to Jiang Shen.

“You said you wanted to be my hero,” Jiang Shen said, “then go do it.”

He looked at Bai Jinyi, smiling, “I like it when you stand in the boxing ring; I like every single punch you throw. Even when you’re injured, I still like you.”

“My hero should stand in a place that’s even higher, even greater, and even brighter.” Jiang Shen’s eyes reddened a little. He reached out, pressing against his own heart. “And I will forever keep your heart safe within mine.”

A youthful love or farewell was both extremely blissful yet also painful. At that time, Jiang Shen did not know how long their future would extend ahead of them.

Years later, when Jiang Shen recalled this night, all that was left were the autumn waters, the fragrance of the rice stalks after slipping into a dream, as well as Bai Jinyi’s passionate yet gentle hug.

Sleeping in the embrace of love, he was willing to have it last forever, never waking up.

★

Although Shen Junyi had given Jiang Shen quite a number of days off, in the end, Jiang Shen was not able to use them all. Liu Xingzhi was the first one to urge him to return.

“Don’t get too caught up in taking a break.” Over the phone, Principal Liu sounded as stern as usual. “My dance isn’t finished yet.”

Jiang Shen felt a little guilty. “I’ve been practicing over the past few days…”

Liu Xingzhi was quite doubtful. “Really?’

Jiang Shen reassured him, “Really. When I get back, *Shixiong*, you can test me however you want.”

It was a perfect segue to Liu Xingzhi’s next question. “So when are you coming back?”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

In comparison, although Su Fang did not rush Bai Jinyi, Senbu gave him a call instead. At this point, the foreigner’s spoken Mandarin had no accent at all, and his words flowed very quickly, in the font of ‘yelling’.

“Even Mayweather is willing to coach you personally!” Senbu’s voice was so loud that everyone could hear him on Bai Jinyi’s end. “Do you know how rare this opportunity is?! Do you have shit for brains?!”

Bai Jinyi pulled his phone away from his ear, his voice cool. “Don’t imitate others, mixing two languages together.”

Senbu was at a loss for words.

Bai Jinyi glanced at Jiang Shen, who had just finished his phone conversation as well. The dancer looked over too, and when their eyes met, Bai Jinyi heard himself say, “Senbu, I’ll go to the States.”

Half a month later.

Inside the dance studio on the fifth floor of Laiyi, Liu Xingzhi had his arms folded across his chest. His dreadlocks had grown even longer, and they were spread lushly across his broad shoulders. Unlike Jiang Shen, his physique was perfect to western standards, and other than needing to maintain the growth of his muscles, he did not need to be on a strict diet. Due to his dancewear being black, it further emphasized the lines and curves of his muscular chest.

Jiang Shen really was afraid of him. Compared to Shen Junyi’s silent strictness, Liu Xingzhi was the sort that followed them around everyday, violently whipping them into shape. Despite Jiang Shen always putting in his greatest effort and hardest work, he was, after all, only around sixteen or seventeen years old. When he occasionally wanted to goof off, he was quite fearful.

To every dancer at Laiyi, their ‘first dance’ was extremely important. This was especially so for ‘prima donnas’ like Liu Xingzhi, who had already won awards and garnered quite a bit of fame. Other than famous teachers and dancers from within the country, the audience for his ‘first dance’ would also include many judges and top dancers from abroad. This was also the reason why there were so many people who wanted to join Liu Xingzhi onstage for his ‘first dance’.

After dancing his part, Jiang Shen was very anxious. Wearing his ballet shoes, he stood in front of Liu Xingzhi obediently, waiting for his critique. Liu Xingzhi had a stern expression, and after staring at Jiang Shen for a moment, he suddenly asked, “Your confession was a success?”

Jiang Shen froze for a second, and a flush spread visibly across his cheeks.

As though choking on something, Liu Xingzhi said in disgust, “What are you getting shy about?!”

Next to them, Jing Luoyun laughed. “Looks like it was a success.”

The flush on Jiang Shen’s cheeks reached his neck. Clumsily, he tried to change the topic. “D-do I still have to continue practicing?”

“No.” Liu Xingzhi gave an impatient wave of his hand. In the end, he glanced at Jiang Shen again, raising his chin pompously, “Not bad.”

The name of Liu Xingzhi’s ‘first dance’ was *Silvergrass*. The music would be accompanied by a symphony orchestra invited by Shen Junyi, and the scores were written by a composer based on the meaning of the dances. It could be said that no

effort was spared, and everyone threw themselves in wholeheartedly.

Ai Lai watched a few days of the last rehearsals, and no longer scolded everyone harshly. His gaze travelled between Liu Xingzhi and Jiang Shen, as though he wanted to say something, only to hold himself back.

"I hope that all of you will be able to enjoy the stage." Ai Lai looked at all the young dancers. "Don't be too concerned about the results. Dancing is a happy thing."

The students answered "yes" as a group, and once they were dismissed, Liu Xingzhi dragged Jiang Shen over to go over the rhythm. Ai Lai sighed, frowning silently.

When Shen Junyi arrived at the studio, most of the students had already left. Ai Lai sat in the middle, facing the full-length mirror, lost in his thoughts. When he saw Shen Junyi in the mirror, he lowered his eyes, a smile spreading across his face.

"You're done watching?" Shen Junyi stood behind him.

"Yes, they danced well."

Shen Junyi's brow lifted. "If they danced well, why is your expression like that?"

After some silence, Ai Lai finally said, "Jiang Shen danced better."

Shen Junyi did not respond, as though already expecting this conclusion.

Ai Lai was a little frustrated. "Why did you agree to let Jiang Shen take the supporting lead role? Liu Xingzhi's 'first dance' is so important. Have none of you thought about what the media will say the next day?"

"I wasn't the one who agreed," Shen Junyi said placidly, "Liu Xingzhi insisted."

Ai Lai's mouth fell open. Resting his forehead in his palm, he laughed wryly. "The fate between a senior and junior… it's truly doomed every time, huh?"

Liu Xingzhi was the star of Laiyi after all, and he would never lack waves of supporters. The next day, when Jiang Shen arrived on the third floor, everyone stopped chatting as soon as they saw him.

Jiang Shen was puzzled.

Quite a number of people looked towards him, their eyes either probing or guarded. Having never come across a situation like this, Jiang Shen was not very adept at dealing with such subtle malice, but he was not so foolish that he didn't notice it at all.

He put down his bag and shoes. Taking his phone with him, he left the classroom. Bai Jinyi was calling him.

“What time is it for you now?” Bai Jinyi asked over the phone.

“9 o’ clock. What about the States?”

“It’s now 8 in the evening, but I’m one day behind you.”

Jiang Shen laughed. After Bai Jinyi told Senbu that he would go to the States, he moved in just a few days. It was unclear what Bai Jinyi told his family, but the villa, chauffeur, and Auntie Zhu were all left to Jiang Shen to take care of his daily necessities.

The two chatted for a little while more, sticky and sweet. Just as they were about to hang up, Bai Jinyi suddenly asked, “You’re alright over there, right?”

Jiang Shen froze for a moment. He did not expect Bai Jinyi to be that astute. Without thinking, he denied it. “Nothing’s wrong… Why?”

Bai Jinyi’s tone was doubtful. “You’re really fine?”

Jiang Shen took a deep breath, feeling warmth spreading throughout his body. Softly, he said, “Things are really fine here, I’m doing great, don’t worry.”

Sitting on a chair in the changing room, Liu Xingzhi was wrapping some athletic tape around his ankle. Turning, he saw Jiang Shen come in with his ballet shoes. He was not sure what this junior of his had done, but his ballet shoes were dripping wet, leaving a trail of water on the floor of the changing room.

“What happened?” Liu Xingzhi finished wrapping one ankle, asking somewhat carelessly, “You dropped your shoes in water?”

Biting his lip, Jiang Shen smiled. “Mn. I wasn’t careful.”

Liu Xingzhi frowned as he mocked him coldly, “Can’t even take care of your shoes properly. What were you thinking?”

Jiang Shen listened to his reprimand obediently without a single retort. He sat down in front of his senior, helping Liu Xingzhi tear the tape. “*Shixiong*, I’ll help you.”

Liu Xingzhi did not refuse, holding his other leg out.

“Don’t practice too much these days, *Shixiong*,” Jiang Shen persuaded softly, as he wrapped his ankle, “it wouldn’t be good if you got injured.”

Liu Xingzhi said lazily, “I’m aware of my limits. You have to practice properly too. I’ve noticed you haven’t been staying back these past few days.”

Jiang Shen glanced up at him. “This is *Shixiong*’s ‘first dance’, my performance is not important.”

Liu Xingzhi froze for a moment, then kicked Jiang Shen unhappily, saying coldly, “What are you talking about?”

With a stiff expression, Jiang Shen did not respond, but his hands moved deftly.

The more Liu Xingzhi thought about it, the more he felt something was wrong. Before his ankle had been fully taped up, he suddenly stood, looking down at Jiang Shen from above. “Tell me what you meant by those words just now. What exactly happened to your shoes?!”

Jiang Shen didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, and softened his tone. “It’s really nothing… *ShixiongShixiong*!”

With one foot bare, Liu Xingzhi bundled up his dreadlocks and rushed downstairs. The door to the third floor change room was not shut, and a few students were inside, chatting and laughing away.

“He even has delusions of snatching the attention away from Principal Liu... Why doesn’t he look at how long he’s been here?”

Someone else said, “But even the ancestor said he danced better… I’m afraid once he’s on stage…”

“What are you afraid of? We’ve already taught him a lesson. If he’s clever, he should know what to do on stage. This is Liu Xingzhi’s ‘first dance’. What is he trying to do, outperforming the principal dancer? Ruin the show?”

With a frosty expression, Liu Xingzhi stood by the door, listening. The students inside clearly hadn’t noticed him. Jiang Shen finally caught up, standing behind Liu Xingzhi, panting. He trembled as he called out, “*Shixiong*.”

Within the laughter, someone suggested, “Why don’t we make it so that he doesn’t dare take the supporting role? That way, we’ll have one less competitor as well. After all, Principal Liu is the face of Laiyi. When the time comes, he doesn’t want to be embarrassed either, does he?”

Jiang Shen heard those words as well. His face was ashen, and he looked up at Liu Xingzhi’s back. Hesitantly, he said, “*Shixiong*… the supporting lead role… I should…”

“Shut up!” Liu Xingzhi gnashed his teeth. He suddenly yanked off the ballet shoe from his foot, rushing into the changing room.

By the time the students realized Liu Xingzhi was there, it was too late. The ballet shoe, flying towards them, slapped one of them right across their face. Shrouded in a murderous air, Liu Xingzhi stood in the center of the change room, commanding loudly, “Jiang Shen!” He held his hand out. “Give me your shoes!”

Speechless, Jiang Shen removed his shoes obediently and handed them to his senior.

Liu Xingzhi grabbed his shoes and immediately started hitting the students with them. A few of the chatting boys covered their heads and scurried away. After about ten minutes of beating, panting, Liu Xingzhi made them kneel on the ground.

"How capable." Tapping Jiang Shen's shoes in his hand, Liu Xingzhi prowled around, barefoot. Grinding his teeth, he sneered, "You've all learned to bully others, huh?"

Most of the people on the ground didn't dare to even breathe too loudly, but there were daring ones, and one of them said stubbornly, "We did it for you, *Shixiong*! You don't want to be a laughingstock on the day of your 'first dance', right?!"

Liu Xingzhi said furiously, "If you call me *shixiong* one more time, I'll tear your lips right off your face!" Then he continued even more ruthlessly, "You have the cheek to say that you did it for me?! Are you the ones afraid of Jiang Shen, or is it fucking me?!"

Liu Xingzhi's chest heaved violently. He jerked his hand towards Jiang Shen, pointing at him, and said loudly, "Jiang Shen dances well because of his hard work and determination! Even if he outshines me during my 'first dance', that's because I, Liu Xingzhi, am not as good as him! What right do you have to screw with him?!"

It seemed that his anger had yet to be vented, and Liu Xingzhi lifted the shoe again, smacking each person on the head. After beating them enough, he shoved the shoes back into Jiang Shen's arms. He looked at his junior, and said coldly, "And you, you'd better dance properly for me. If I were to discover that you've been slacking off or purposefully making yourself look worse during my 'first dance', don't even think about calling me *shixiong* again for the rest of your life."

Liu Xingzhi tossed his head back, lifting his chin, and said haughtily, "With my dignity as a dancer, I don't need anyone else to use such methods to pity me!"

★

Mayweather's boxing gym had a long-standing reputation in L.A., and naturally, Floyd Mayweather himself was both the gym's boss and superstar. He led the professional boxing circle of the United States for nearly twenty years, and finally, with an all-win record of 49 matches, he retired, forever known as the legend of the generation, completely unmatched.

In the month or so that Bai Jinyi was there, Senbu rarely appeared, but Mayweather would come and watch him train every day.

In the boxing ring, Mayweather was known for his 'pirate' boxing style, an expert at the besieging tactic. His physique was not bulky or muscular for a black

person, and he mostly fought in the welterweight or lightweight classes. Due to his flexibility and nimble footwork, he was excellent at dodging. Plus, with his superb all-around skills, as well as his infallible stamina, he usually used a defensive counterattack style, staying a slight distance away from his opponent. This was also very suited to Bai Jinyi's personal style.

The Asian physique was not suitable for participating in any class above middleweight, and there were not many in even the welterweight or lightweight classes. Floyd Mayweather had debuted in the featherweight class, and had only fought his way into the lightweight and welterweight classes later.

"You really don't like people hitting your face, huh?" Mayweather asked Bai Jinyi after a training session.

Bai Jinyi picked up a towel, tugging it over his head. Ripping open his gloves with his teeth, he replied in English, "I don't."

Mayweather laughed. "Neither do I."

Bai Jinyi glanced at the man. He did not know what Mayweather's intentions were. Although he would come and watch him train every day, this boxer of the century never stepped into the ring to give him any pointers personally. To Bai Jinyi, this was no big deal. Other than spending most of his time training, the rest of his time was spent studying the matches of boxers who had similar styles to him.

Besides, the boxing gym was not a place for peace and quiet.

It was a food chain — the survival of the fittest.

Bai Jinyi's Asian face was too different and new. Amongst a group of black and white people with superior physiques, Bai Jinyi really could be considered 'weak, helpless, and pitiful'. Also, they were of similar age, filled with competitive spirit, and boiling with testosterone. For the first few months that Bai Jinyi was there, the other boys would come and pick a quarrel almost daily.

This sort of annoying prejudice and harassment only ended completely when Bai Jinyi KO-ed a black boxer in the same weight category on the first day of his second month there.

Bai Jinyi's victory had actually been extremely difficult. If he hadn't knocked out his opponent in their eighth round, he definitely would not have won with the final scores given by the judges.

Bai Jinyi only realized after the match that his ribs were all bruised; the only silver lining was that they were not broken. One of his eyes was severely swollen, and to prevent Jiang Shen from worrying, he cancelled their video call for the night.

The other boy was not an idiot, and knew what had happened without even thinking.

"Does it hurt?" Jiang Shen asked over the phone.

Bai Jinyi laughed lightly. “You’re always asking me that.”

Jiang Shen sighed. “Because I don’t know what else I can do for you.”

Bai Jinyi did not speak. He was now living in a residential district north of Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills. Although the land value here could not compare to the mansions at the top of the hill, it was still a very pricey area, and was definitely rich people territory.

Of course, if his mother was here, they would also be able to afford a place up at the top of the hills.

“I won, so it doesn’t hurt so much.” Bai Jinyi accepted an ice pack from the housekeeper and placed it on his eye. “When is your ‘first dance’?”

Jiang Shen corrected him. “It’s not mine, it’s *Shixiong’*s.”

“Aren’t you going onstage too?” Bai Jinyi asked again, “When is it?”

“It’s early next month. Do I need to save a ticket for you?”

“I’ll be able to get one myself.”

Jiang Shen did not know where his confidence came from. Helpless, he said, “Tickets to *shixiong*’s performances cannot be bought so easily. He has a lot of male fans, and they’re all very rich. On average, they hire at least ten scalpers each.”

Bai Jinyi refused to accept. “I can hire scalpers too. I’ll hire a hundred.”

Jiang Shen was left speechless.

Listening to Bai Jinyi showing off his riches for such a matter was actually quite boring. The two boys had not seen each other in such a long time, and both phone and video calls were unable to resolve how much they missed each other. Bai Jinyi listened as Little Swan chattered away, talking about this and that. His heart softened into a mess, and even the blood and pain of the boxing ring became easy to bear.

“Next time, stop asking me if it hurts anymore,” said Bai Jinyi suddenly.

Jiang Shen asked softly, “Then what should I ask you?”

Bai Jinyi thought for a while, and said in a low voice, “Ask me if I miss you, ask me if I like you.”

He was just like a child asking for sweets. Clearly, he wanted nothing more, but he had to make the other ask him whether or not he missed it, whether or not he wanted it, as though it would be sweeter if he was asked first.

*As long as you ask, I'll tell you.*

*I miss you very much, and I like you very, very much.*

Because of the time difference, Jiang Shen always called or video chatted with Bai Jinyi early in the morning. As time went on, his seniors could not help but nose in.

"Is that the one you confessed to, the one who went to the States?" Although Jing Luoyun was rather shy, it did not hinder her everlasting, burning desire for gossip. "Are you two officially dating now?"

Jiang Shen was still a little embarrassed about it. "I-I guess so."

Jing Luoyun then said, "A long distance relationship sure is tough. What sort of person is he?"

Jiang Shen seemed to be thinking about how to praise Bai Jinyi. After some time, he finally said earnestly, "He's a very, very good person, and he's extremely good at fighting. He's both handsome and cool!"

Jing Luoyun was shocked. Her thoughts seemed to be veering in the wrong direction, as she asked, worried, "Are you dating a delinquent? You won't get bullied, will you?"

Liu Xingzhi could not continue listening, and explained on behalf of Jiang Shen. "It's that rich boyfriend of his, with the strange sense of aesthetics. He boxes."

"Wow!" Jing Luoyun's eyes widened. "He boxes? That's so impressive!"

Liu Xingzhi said disdainfully, "How is that impressive?" He looked at Jiang Shen, seemingly disappointed with how he did not aim higher. "I don't know how you, a ballet dancer, could like a boxer! It's so vulgar!"

Jiang Shen was now aware that this senior of his was someone with a vicious tongue but soft heart. He did not get angry with Liu Xingzhi, only refuting deliberately, "*Shixiong*, you're the vulgar one, you only like Mr. Pu's money."

Liu Xingzhi was at a loss for words.

Naturally, this sort of daily bickering ended with Jiang Shen being held down on the ground and twisted about by Liu Xingzhi. Liu Xingzhi sat on his waist, holding his calf and bending his knee, demanding, "Are you still going to be cheeky?!"

Even if Jiang Shen's flexibility could take it, he was unable to endure Liu Xingzhi's weight, so he could only pound the floor and plead for mercy.

Standing to the side, it was unsuitable for Jing Luoyun to help either one of them. Contrasting her appearance, she could only stutter feebly, and in the end, this one-

sided battle only ended when Ai Lai and Shen Junyi entered the studio…

But time was mischievous, and there was a limit on how long they could fool around. The day finally came for Liu Xingzhi's 'first dance', *Silvergrass*, to debut. Flowers from Bai Jinyi were piled up high outside Jiang Shen's dressing room door. He was doing his last few warmups, and the makeup artist had drawn images of wolves and deers on his shoulders.

"Ready?" Liu Xingzhi's dreadlocks had been combed into a tall ponytail, and colorful feathers hung from the tips. As he walked, the golden bells around his ankles tinkled delightfully.

"Go and dance, Jiang Shen." Liu Xingzhi looked down at his junior. His eyes were bright, like fireworks bursting in the sky. "Dance, and show them your soul."

★

Before stepping out of the subway, Tan Lingling checked her reflection once again in the window, tidying up her freshly permed hair. Jiang Luoshan was even more nervous, loosening the knot of his tie multiple times, only for his wife to straighten it again.

"It's necessary to be dressed formally when watching a ballet," Tan Lingling said anxiously as she tightened the tie forcefully around her husband's neck, "we cannot embarrass our son."

Other than them, the Chen and Shen families had also received invitations to attend. Chen Laoshi had bought a new suit specially for the event, while Li Zhuo and Miao Hua'er had new cheongsams made in a rush order. Shen Guoliang was carrying a huge flower basket, and throughout the entire journey, he was very careful not to let it knock into anything.

Their group was rather eye-catching, standing in the middle of the train, and the parents all felt that the big city was truly different. Even finding their way after getting out of the train took some time. Miao Hua'er's phone rang for a while before she finally picked it up, and Qingling-*zi*'s voice sounded very anxious on the other end. "*Ma*, why haven't you guys gotten here yet?"

Miao Hua'er's voice had always been rather loud, and many of the surrounding people glanced over at her from the corner of their eyes. "We just got off the subway. You're all there already?"

Qingling-*zi* said, "We got here ages ago. I told you we should come together, but you had to refuse."

Miao Hua'er responded, "*Aiyah*, it's the same, it's the same. You go ahead first, we'll be right there."

Tan Lingling saw her hang up and asked urgently, "Maoxiu and Shubao are there already?"

Miao Hua'er laughed cheerily. "They're all there, they're all there. Our seats are really good, they're in the front row."

Tan Lingling let out a sigh of relief. She glanced at the time, then quickly dragged Jiang Luoshan along and ran out of the station.

Dressed in a white, lacy, poofy dress, Qingling-*zi* sat in her seat, feeling a little reserved. This was also the first time that Goumao and Shubao ever wore a suit, and they sat on either side of her. Around them were people they did not know, and many of them were of other nationalities. These people's auras and attire couldn't be compared to a normal person's, and even Chen Maoxiu was so nervous, he felt a little meek. "W-we're not in the wrong seats, are we?"

Shen Shubao was still quite composed. He straightened his back, speaking sternly, "We're in the right seats. Don't be so timid, we must be confident!"

Chen Maoxiu followed suit, straightening up as well. "Have you found Lai Song and Richie Rich Bai yet?"

"No." Shen Shubao nudged his glasses up. His neck did not move, but his eyes darted about brightly. "But I see Fairy Song Xin."

Song Xin was dressed in a champagne silk, spaghetti strap gown, revealing the beautiful curves of her back. Her long hair cascaded down in waves over her shoulders, and when she saw Chen Qingling, she waved. "Little Qingling-*zi*~"

Chen Qingling had been keeping in touch with her throughout these years, and they had a very close relationship. The two girls held hands and hugged, finally dissipating the stiff atmosphere around them.

"Good thing you're here." Qingling-*zi* was feeling rather apprehensive. "We don't know anyone at all… it's so awkward."

Song Xin's beautiful eyes widened, and said quite willfully, "Why do you need to know anyone? Jiang Shen is the supporting lead, the second most important person on stage. You should be sitting here proudly, with your heads raised high. Why bother with other people?"

Chen Qingling said in a small voice, "It feels like they're all very important people. It's not just us, our parents and the other aunties and uncles are feeling quite stressed as well."

Song Xin understood where they were coming from, and patted Chen Qingling's hand in consolation.

Liu Xingzhi's 'first dance' was highly anticipated in the ballet circle, and all the mainstream media had dispatched their reporters to the show. If they came across any top dancers, they took photos and requested interviews. Some even made their way to the front rows, interviewing the audience. Seeing the microphone in front of

him, Shen Shubao was a little nervous, and he shrank back, making way.

The reporter could probably tell they were not from within the ballet circle, and asked with extreme friendliness, “Are you friends and family of Principal Dancer Liu?”

Shen Shubao shook his head. “We’re Jiang Shen’s friends.”

“Jiang Shen?” The reporter was surprised. Glancing at his program and confirming the name, he smiled, a little embarrassed, “So you’re friends of Jiang Shen, the supporting lead. Today is his first time performing on such a grand stage. As his friends, are you nervous?”

Goumao scratched his head, his smile frank and simple. “We’re actually fine… He dances very well, and we’re all very proud of him, so we’re sure his performance will be outstanding today as well.

The reporter was speechless, and not managing to control his features, his expression looking visibly odd. In the ballet circle, people were very strict about seniority and experience. Principal Dancer Liu’s ‘first dance’ had yet to even start, and these people were already praising the supporting lead for dancing well… Such behavior made them seem unobservant, dumb, and foolish.

The audience consisted mainly of rich people. Glancing at the way these friends and family members were dressed, the somewhat experienced reporter already had an idea of the situation in front of him. He gave a perfunctory smile, no longer continuing the conversation, and turned to interview others instead.

Goumao was a little baffled and nearly stammered, “D-did I say something wrong?”

Shen Shubao frowned. He did not think Chen Maoxiu had said anything he shouldn’t have, but looking at the expression of the reporter, something was not quite right.

“They wouldn’t be writing any nonsense, right?” Chen Maoxiu started sweating from anxiety. “No, I have to go explain.”

Song Xin held him back, shaking her head. “The more you say, the worse it’ll get. We’ll just wait for the performance to speak for itself. With so many pairs of eyes watching, I bet he wouldn’t dare write any nonsense.”

When Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan arrived at the entrance of the theatre, there was actually still about half an hour before the start of the performance. The adults did not expect to see any familiar faces at the entrance of the theatre, but Miao Hua’er suddenly called out joyfully, “Old Sir!”

The old bookstore owner turned around. He was dressed in an old but spotless suit, his face clean shaven. His new glasses sat neatly across his nose, and he was even wearing a beret. Seeing them, he smiled so wide that even his teeth could be

seen. “You guys have arrived.”

Tan Lingling griped, “Why didn’t Shenshen tell us he gave you a ticket as well? Was the trip alright by yourself?”

The old man waved her off. “I’m not so old that I can’t travel by myself. Look, I’m even trendier than you.” He said, and raised the camera around his neck. “I came to take photos of our Little Swan.”

Despite his words, the old man’s camera could not compare to the huge zoom lenses carried by the ‘Fairies of Paradise’. The old man was not ashamed, consulting them humbly, then standing in position with them. He even asked them what angle would be the best to photograph from.

The ‘Fairies of Paradise’ were all good tempered and gentle, asking him, “*Yeye*, who are you a fan of?”

The old man answered, both delighted and proud, “I’m the Little Swan’s ‘Grandpa Caretaker’.”

The audience had pretty much filled up by the time Bai Jinyi and Lai Song finally arrived. Over the past few years, Lai Song had grown quite a bit taller. Ever since he retired, he no longer maintained his physique as strictly, and there was no longer a need for him to bulk up to the point of looking like a little mountain. However, due to his extremely good foundation, he could still be considered broad and muscular, tall and sturdy.

Bai Jinyi had been dragged over warmly by Tan Lingling to sit down next to her. Lai Song looked around, and not caring whether he would annoy anyone by squeezing his way about, insisted on sitting next to Song Xin.

Folding her arms and crossing her legs, Song Xin fixed her eyes straight ahead, refusing to look at him.

Lai Song clicked his tongue, speaking in a carefree manner, “Why are you throwing a tantrum, Xinxin-*mei*?”

Song Xin gritted her teeth. Lowering her voice, she said, “Don’t call me that when we’re outside!”

“Then what should I call you?” Lai Song looked at her, chuckling. “Darling?”

Song Xin was speechless.

If they had to decide who was more shameless, Bai Jinyi might actually lose to Lai Song. Bai Jinyi spoke with Tan Lingling with his head down for a little while, when he saw Shen Guoliang handing him a flower basket. “It’s for Shen-*zi*.”

Bai Jinyi accepted it. “I’ll pass it to him once the performance is over.”

Just as Tan Lingling made a noise of agreement, they suddenly heard a commotion coming from behind them. Bai Jinyi turned, only to see Zhou Luoxiang walking down the aisle. He was supporting an old man who looked hale and hearty. They were surrounded by reporters, their cameras flashing nonstop.

Song Xin narrowed her eyes, her expression turning serious. She informed the others, "The person Zhou Luoxiang is supporting is the esteemed teacher of the three prides of Laiyi. The royalty of the ballet circle, Liang-*lao*."

Goumao stared in their direction, his expression not looking too great. "Isn't that the reporter interviewing us just now?"

When Bai Jinyi heard that, he immediately focused his attention on the reporter. He was not too far from them, and heard every single word the reporter was saying.

"Principal Dancer Liu is the grand disciple you like the most, right?" The reporter asked, laughing.

Liang-*lao* nodded. Zhou Luoxiang invited him to take the center seat, his smile kind. "Xingzhi is very talented, and he's both earnest and hardworking. I do like him."

The reporter continued asking, "Then, what do you think of today's supporting lead, Jiang Shen? Many people are saying he dances very well."

"Oh?" Liang-*lao* said, seemingly a little surprised. He rarely dealt with the matters of his grand disciples anymore. Once, when Liu Xingzhi had won an award, he had been one of the judges, so this grand disciple had left a great impression on him. "This is the first time I've heard about this child. What sort of person is he?"

The reporter had clearly done his homework beforehand, but did not go into specifics. "I heard that he's from some small place, his family background so-so. His parents, family, and friends are all farmers. He only went through proper training through Master Shen after he came to Laiyi. Who knows if he'll suffer from stage fright performing on such a large stage for the first time."

Liang-*lao* and the others were sitting directly in front of Bai Jinyi and the others. Clearly, this reporter did not intend to hide any of his opinions. Chen Maoxiu was so angry that his hands were shaking, but he dared not protest, afraid that if he kicked up a fuss, it would bring Jiang Shen trouble. The faces of Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan looked pretty awful as well, and if not for Chen Laoshi holding her back, Miao Hua'er would have started cursing at the reporter ages ago.

Bai Jinyi clenched his fist. He stood up and was just about to walk over when he heard Zhou Luoxiang snort quietly to the side.

"What year are we living in now?" Zhou Luoxiang's charming eyes were alluring and brimming with emotions. Together with his good looks and mix of feminine and masculine charm, he had a sort of androgynous look to him. "Do you not

understand the saying ‘there’s no need to ask where a hero comes from’?”

Liang-*lao* had rarely seen Zhou Luoxiang speak up on others’ behalf before. Calm and collected, he did not respond.

That reporter probably hadn’t expected Zhou Luoxiang to speak out against him, and his smile froze on his face. With his mouth wide open, he did not know what to say.

Resting his head in his palm, Zhou Luoxiang had an enigmatic smile curling around his lips. “Every time Laiyi chooses a student, have they ever gone wrong? What? You know how to dance as well?”

The reporter could not come up with a response.

Zhou Luoxiang glanced at his name tag, speaking mildly, “I am quite familiar with your company. As for how you want to write your article, it’s time you used your brain.”

Jiang Shen was already standing behind the curtains onstage. The director confirmed his position with him one last time. Across the stage from him, Liu Xingzhi was also preparing to start. Despite not being able to see each other, they both had an inexplicable mutual understanding that put them at ease.

Jing Luoyun stood behind Jiang Shen, giving him a light pat on his shoulder. “Dance well,” she mouthed at him, “Down there are world famous, top judges from Lausanne, Vienna, and Helsinki. Those are your future battlefields.”

Jiang Shen nodded firmly. Softly, he said, “I know.”

Beyond the curtains, the conductor of the symphony orchestra took to the stand. He held out his hand in invitation, and a lady dressed in traditional Mongolian clothes stepped into the soloist position, a horsehead fiddle in her hand.

The simple, honest, yet desolate sound of the fiddle was like water flowing atop the clouds. As the curtains drew apart slowly, Jiang Shen and Liu Xingzhi leapt simultaneously across the stage from each side.

## Chapter 11 — Growing Wildly

*Silvergrass* was a story about a Mongolian youth becoming a god: the sixth grand Living Buddha, Xilutuzhao, born in the Xilamuren grasslands. Golden bells rang when he walked, his hair like hawk feathers, and the scorching heat within the youth's chest burned like flames. Everlasting lotus flowers bloomed under his feet.

Liu Xingzhi's eyes held no pain or joy, only compassion and benevolence. He was like a high and mighty god, the golden bells around his ankles tinkling gently with his footsteps. Accompanied by the rising and falling melody of the horsehead fiddle, the young Living Buddha, Xilutuzhao, extended his arms, embracing the sky. The muscles and lines of his back were so beautiful, they seemed carved with a knife.

Xilituzhao seemed to emerge from the rays of sunlight in the sky. He walked along the grass, finally stopping in front of a young shepherd boy, Wu'en.

A beam of light was cast onto Jiang Shen. With his back towards the audience, he held himself upright and straight. Kneeling on the ground, a deer and a wolf were drawn on each of his tense shoulders.

As the beat of the drums grew, the youth, Wu'en, moved.

In the audience, Tan Lingling almost couldn't believe that this was her son. She was so emotional, she was trembling slightly, and she turned to look at her husband, trying to contain her emotions.

Jiang Luoshan's eyes were completely red and swimming with tears. His gaze was glued to the person dancing on stage.

Jiang Shen nearly cleared half the stage with another grand jeté. Although the lines of his muscles were not as distinct as Liu Xingzhi's, they were supple and smooth. As he stood en pointe on one foot, the strength and power of his waist was evident, emphasizing the beautiful shoulder blades upon his back, and bringing the drawings of the wolf and deer to life.

Under the intense beat of the drums, the Living Buddha, Xilutuzhao, danced together with the shepherd boy, Wu'en. Their bodies twisted together, and their eyes met. One was quiet and silent, the other unrestrained and passionate.

Liu Xingzhi's dance expressed a boundless, unlimited freedom, while Jiang Shen expressed a reservedness that was as deep and as vast as the earth.

The dance corps entered the stage as the Living Buddha and the shepherd boy strolled to the center. Their sweat drops were like sparkling, shattering fragments of stars. Xilutuzhao removed his golden bells, gifting them to Wu'en. The young shepherd bowed his head piously, his back straight and proud. As he faced away from the audience, it seemed like the drawings on his shoulders would never extinguish.

When the curtains fell, the audience was silent for two full seconds. The crowd only managed to react after Liang-*lao* and Zhou Luoxiang stood up to applaud at

the same time. In an instant, the entire theatre boiled over in excitement.

Song Xin and Qingling-*zi* hugged each other, crying inconsolably. Tan Lingling needed Bai Jinyi's support to stand, and Jiang Luoshan wiped his eyes, his tears falling silently.

The performance impacted Bai Jinyi no less than the others. It had been a long time since he had last seen Jiang Shen, and as soon as he did, he was presented with such an astonishingly beautiful ballet. This made him even more emotional and thrilled than KO-ing someone successfully in the boxing ring.

The curtains hadn't opened, and the dancers had yet to take their curtain call, but a crowd of cameras and microphones were already gathered before the stage, ready to interview them. After leaving the stage, Jiang Shen was still unable to extricate himself from the emotions of the dance, and when he looked at Liu Xingzhi, his eyes were still filled with adoration and awe.

Liu Xingzhi sighed, giving him a fierce tap on his head. "Wake up. You need to fix this habit of yours, or you're going to get yourself into trouble sooner or later."

Jiang Shen shook his head, as he gave a confused "Ah".

Jing Luoyun handed them both towels, her voice soft and gentle as she said, "Wipe your faces. You still have to take the curtain call and answer the press's questions. Your performances tonight were too wonderful, and tomorrow, all sorts of praises and compliments are bound to be showered upon you two."

Liu Xingzhi snorted, pleased. He looked at Jiang Shen, who still seemed slightly out of it. Resigned, he threw an arm around his junior's shoulders, and pointed towards the audience. "Jiang Shen, take a good look at all those people."

Jiang Shen looked back at him, puzzled.

"They've been brought to submission by your soul, and they're now kneeling at your feet." Liu Xingzhi's voice was filled with pride and arrogance. "You're the light of their future."

Due to the overzealous audience, Liu Xingzhi took about seven or eight curtain calls, bringing Jiang Shen along with him every time. There were so many bouquets in their arms that they were getting sore. Jiang Shen did not have the slightest bit of experience with interviews, and most of the questions directed at him were answered by Liu Xingzhi or Jing Luoyun. Of course, the main lead of the night was still Principal Liu. He had always been the darling of the media, whether it was about his dancing or his face.

Bai Jinyi and the others were all ushered to the celebration dinner early as Jiang Shen's friends and family. By then, their emotions had finally calmed down a little. The rental bookstore owner was even huddled together with some of the 'Fairies of Paradise', looking at the photos they had just taken. Servers in the huge waiting room were bringing guests drinks and sweets.

The interviews finally concluded. Shen Junyi and Ai Lai led the main dancers down from the stage. Jiang Shen didn't even have the time to remove his makeup when he saw Bai Jinyi, and he lit up from within, all the way from head to toe.

Without thinking, Bai Jinyi held his arms out, catching Jiang Shen, who threw himself at Bai Jinyi.

Next to them, Liu Xingzhi clicked his tongue sourly, while Jing Luoyun chuckled, her laughter full of significance. The others didn't think anything of the two boys, only thinking that they had not seen each other in a long time, and that they had a really good relationship. After hugging for some time, Jiang Shen finally clambered off of Bai Jinyi, then ran over to hug Tan Lingling and Jiang Luoshan. Once the hugging started, it did not end, and Goumao and Shen Shubao could not help but join in on the fun as well. Qingling-*zi* and Song Xin, being girls, were a little more restrained, but in the end, they still gave Jiang Shen a hug each, and were both reluctant to let him go as well.

Compared to Jiang Shen's simple circle of friends and family, Liu Xingzhi's fan club was truly rich and colorful. As Bai Jinyi helped Jiang Shen remove his makeup, Jing Luoyun started gossiping with them off to the side.

"That's Mr. Pu right there," whispered Jing Luoyun as she pointed to one of the men. Knowledgeably, she continued, "He's Liu Xingzhi's number one VIP fan."

Jiang Shen was astonished. "There are numbers two and three?"

"Not just two and three. Liu Xingzhi has numbered them all, and there's nearly enough to fill a military camp." Jing Luoyun paused. Seemingly very pained, she added, "They're numbered according to how much money they throw at him."

Jiang Shen was speechless. A moment later, he could not help sighing, "Does *Shixiong* really see nothing but money?"

Despite all that, Mr. Pu did not actually look like he was made of money. He seemed to be around thirty years of age, and his temperament was not extremely noticeable. The clothes he wore were of good quality, appearing to be custom-made, but his physique was a little feeble looking, as though he was lacking in strength and power.

Just as Jiang Shen was staring at him, Mr. Pu suddenly turned towards Jiang Shen.

Bai Jinyi's brows knitted, and he saw Mr. Pu walking towards them, holding a wine glass.

"Young Master Bai." Pu Lian knew Bai Jinyi, or rather, he was aware of the Bai family, as they shared mutual business interests.

With surprising patience, Bai Jinyi acknowledged him. "Mr. Pu."

Pu Lian's facial features were not sharp and distinct, but more like ink mixed with water. When he smiled, a few wrinkles appeared at the corners of his eyes, and he seemed a little old. "Mr. Jiang danced very well today. I was extremely moved watching him from my seat."

Hurriedly, Jiang Shen replied modestly, "No, no… *Shixiong* danced better."

Pu Lian was a little surprised, but he did not deny it. Pressing his lips together, he spoke a little bashfully, "Of course Xingzhi is the best."

Listening to him, Jiang Shen did not feel much, but Bai Jinyi found it grating to the ear. He snorted coldly and said passive aggressively, "Mr. Pu's rose-tinted lenses are a little too thick, aren't they?"

Both Jiang Shen and Jing Luoyun did not know how to react.

At a time like this, obviously no one wanted to see an argument erupting between these two 'fans'. Just as Jiang Shen's head ached over how to deal with the situation, Liu Xingzhi finally sauntered over.

Principal Liu, who had finally finished making his rounds through the room like a butterfly, leaned into Mr. Pu's ear with great intimacy, huffing out a breath. Watching as the blush spread from the older man's neck up his face, Liu Xingzhi did not pity him, and said insouciantly, "Why are you here? Did you fall for my junior?"

Everyone was speechless.

Which field of flowers did this demon come from?! With so many eyes watching, how could he be so shameless?!

★

"Once again, Liu Xingzhi has given a performance that has transcended beyond himself. His footwork was impeccable, and his control over his muscles have left all the other modern ballet dancers of our country in the dust. Through his dancing, he expressed a true divinity, and made the audience look up to him in awe."

"This time, Liu Xingzhi has shattered any doubts the industry has had towards him — his so-called 'insufficient expressiveness'. In the performance, his emotions were completely liberated. With that, we also have to mention the performance of the supporting lead, Jiang Shen. His appearance incited Liu Xingzhi's desire to perform even better, making his 'first dance' so much more perfect."

"Two out of the three new stars in China's modern ballet world are already making names for themselves on the international stage, glowing brightly. The other star is also rising steadily. As expected of Laiyi, the glorious place that once brought up the three top ballet dancers in the country: Shen Junyi, Zhou Luoxiang, and Ai Lai. Their spirit is everlasting."

★

Jing Luoyun collected the pouring praises and compliments carefully, preparing a set for both Jiang Shen and Liu Xingzhi. Aside from magazines and newspapers, the internet was exploding with even more. Videos of Liu Xingzhi and Jiang Shen were shared so much that they even ended up trending on Weibo. The ballet circle was not really mainstream, and it was quite unexpected that they would trend even outside of it, in the general population.

The success of the 'first dance' created an almost joyful, festive atmosphere at Laiyi. Shen Junyi decided to give most of the students a break. Of course, Jiang Shen got one too, but he did not know what to do with all this free time.

Bai Jinyi kept him company as he practiced at Laiyi. With just the two of them alone, it was quite obvious that something a little strange was in the air.

Facing the full-length mirror, Jiang Shen did the splits and bent down towards the floor. When he leaned to touch one of his feet, he saw Bai Jinyi's gaze through the mirror.

Bai Jinyi was not a warm person. Normally, he was more like a blade that had been sharpened to a gleaming edge. As a boxer, he needed to have an aura of fierceness and toughness to oppress his opponents and to control himself. But facing Jiang Shen, no matter how cold Bai Jinyi was, he would always melt into a mild, cool gentleness.

Resting his head on his palm, he watched as Jiang Shen's face grew red slowly, then said, a little wickedly, "You're not focusing."

Jiang Shen closed his eyes, refusing to look at him. A beat later, he heard Bai Jinyi laughing softly.

"Since you have a long break," Bai Jinyi said quietly, "would you like to come with me to America?"

The process of applying for a passport was not complicated, and he was a ballet dancer, so the application was quickly approved. This was the first time Jiang Shen was going overseas, and Tan Lingling reminded him repeatedly not to cause any trouble for Bai Jinyi, while wondering if he should bring an electric kettle along with him to the States.

"They don't use the same voltage as us over there," Tan Lingling said worriedly, "do you need to bring an adaptor along?"

Jiang Shen had to tell her, "Bai Jinyi already has a place over there; he has everything."

Tan Lingling blinked. "He bought a place?"

Jiang Shen nodded.

In a little bit of disbelief, Tan Lingling stood there in a daze for a while, before mumbling, “My godson is that rich…?”

When they sent Jiang Shen to the airport, Bai Jinyi was already there waiting. Although the two boys were of similar ages — in fact, Bai Jinyi was actually a little younger, if they really got down to the details — but with his physique, most people treated Bai Jinyi as an adult.

As though she was entrusting her child over to someone else, Tan Lingling had a motherly expression on her face that said ‘I’ll be handing my son off to you from now on’. Without much reluctance, she sent both boys to security. Just as Jiang Shen removed his jacket for inspection, someone suddenly accepted it from behind him. He originally thought it was Bai Jinyi, but looking back, he saw an ethereal-looking face.

Ai Lai took his jacket, casually tucking it into a tray for inspection, then waved at Jiang Shen’s alarmed face. “Hi.”

Bai Jinyi also didn’t expect that his and Jiang Shen’s alone time would end before it could even start. Ai Lai’s seat was right next to theirs, and with great familiarity, he took out a set of amenities for the overnight flight. Before pulling on his sleeping mask, he beamed at the two boys. “I’ll see you when we land.”

When they left the plane, they really did meet again…

Originally, Bai Jinyi was still holding onto the hope that once he brought Jiang Shen back to his apartment, they would not need to see this person again. In the end, Ai Lai’s apartment was not too far from his…

“My dance studio is in Los Angeles as well,” said Ai Lai as he looked at Jiang Shen, “I’ll send you the address. Remember to report there tomorrow.”

Trembling, Jiang Shen had no choice but to agree.

Bai Jinyi was so angry, his face was nearly purple, but there was nothing he could do about it. Jet lagged, Jiang Shen resisted his impulse to sleep, and made it through the day. In the evening, after Bai Jinyi had tidied up the bed, Jiang Shen had already fallen asleep on the couch.

Not saying a word, Bai Jinyi looked down at him from his height for a while. Then, he crouched down, pinching the boy’s face.

Groggily, Jiang Shen grabbed at the tips of his fingers, mumbling, “I’m sleepy…”

Bai Jinyi did not pull his hand back and said, “Go sleep on the bed.”

Jiang Shen did not move. He really was too tired, and like a little animal, he nuzzled his cheek into Bai Jinyi’s palm before falling back asleep. This time, he was completely asleep; no matter what Bai Jinyi said, he did not hear it.

Sleeping through the night, Jiang Shen woke up the next morning to find himself still lying on the couch. When the housekeeper saw that he was awake, she brought his lunch over to him, informing him that Bai Jinyi had already left for the gym.

"Can I go to the boxing gym to see him?" Jiang Shen asked while eating.

The housekeeper was Chinese as well, and she smiled as she said, "Of course, I'll arrange for someone to drive you there."

To reach Mayweather's gym, they had to drive three or four blocks. This was the first time Jiang Shen had come to the United States, and he was plastered right up against the window, looking at the scenery outside, wanting nothing more than a second pair of eyes to help him take in the view. The driver drove him right to the entrance of the gym, and from afar, they saw Su Fang, who was already waiting for him there.

"Bai Jinyi said that you were coming, and asked me to come out to get you." Su Fang smiled, studying Jiang Shen. "You've changed a lot."

Jiang Shen touched his face, not understanding. "I did?"

"It's not your appearance, but your demeanor." She took her phone out. "I've seen the videos of you dancing; you're so good."

Ever since the night of the 'first dance', Jiang Shen experienced what it meant to be famous. Other than being continuously praised both online and offline, the number of viewers, fans, and posts in his super topic on Weibo had increased exponentially. Of course, what was even more tangible was the increase of actual ballet enthusiasts who had become his fans. Right now, he was like Liu Xingzhi and Jing Luoyun, receiving gifts and flowers regularly on a weekly basis.

But even so, when facing compliments and praises in person, Jiang Shen would still feel very shy. After Su Fang's words, he blushed uncontrollably.

Su Fang led him into the boxing gym. For gyms owned by famous people like Mayweather, it was always crowded inside. Other than the boxers, there were also various scouts and managers, all aiming to discover the next boxing superstar.

"Bai Jinyi has an amateur match today, so there are quite a lot of people here." Su Fang ushered Jiang Shen to the waiting room. Bai Jinyi was sitting there, listening to Mayweather's directions before the match.

Very few boxers attempted to fight in the professional leagues before the age of 18. Even a legend like Mayweather had only officially stepped into the big leagues after he turned nineteen, and these amateur matches were training and experience for boxers before they went professional. Ever since Bai Jinyi had arrived, he had already fought around thirty or forty amateur matches arranged for him by Mayweather. He was one of the few Asian boxers around, and was in the lightweight and welterweight classes. With such determination, it naturally drew the attention of many people.

Mayweather seemed to be done with his instructions. Bai Jinyi turned, finally seeing Jiang Shen. He raised his brow, waving for him to enter.

"He's your friend?" Mayweather asked in English.

Bai Jinyi, however, replied in Mandarin. "My boyfriend."

Su Fang did not seem to be surprised and translated for him. Mayweather laughed, giving them a thumbs up, then left, leaving them alone. "There's only ten minutes, so be quick," said Su Fang as she closed the door behind her.

It took Jiang Shen quite some time to react. In a panic, he stuttered, "S-su Fang-*jie*, s-she knows…"

"She's my manager." Bai Jinyi looked completely unconcerned. "Of course I have to inform her about such matters immediately."

Jiang Shen's mouth fell open. Although his view of romance was simple, he was no longer a young, inexperienced child, not knowing the outside world anymore. Back in China, gay people were no longer considered to be deviants, but they also weren't accepted by everyone yet. Bai Jinyi being so frank about it was something Jiang Shen never expected.

Jiang Shen said haltingly, "Then your parents…"

"My mother probably has an inkling, but she didn't mention anything. She has the final word at home. Since she's fine with me coming here to box, and knows that you're coming with me as well, she's probably accepted it already."

Jiang Shen was speechless. A parent who could accept their son's sexual orientation so easily was rather scary to some extent…

"Besides, I'm already your parents' godson." Bai Jinyi pulled on his boxing gloves, holding them out to Jiang Shen. "To return the favor, you're also our family's godson."

Holding onto Bai Jinyi's fists, Jiang Shen was resigned towards Bai Jinyi's nonsense. Thinking for a moment, he lowered his head, pressing his lips to Bai Jinyi's boxing gloves softly.

"I hope you can win your match today as well," Jiang Shen prayed devoutly with his eyes shut, "and come back to me safely after."

★

Despite having watched so many of Bai Jinyi's matches, every match felt just like the first to Jiang Shen. There was no difference to him at all.

The atmosphere in the gym was restless, and the people here were a lot more unrestrained than back at home. The only protective gear that amateur boxers wore was the mouth guard. Surrounding the ring were muscular men shouting away, and this time, Bai Jinyi's opponent was a new, Hispanic boxer. When Su Fang saw Jiang Shen walk out from the lounge, she waved him over.

"You don't have to worry too much." Su Fang's smile was very relaxed. "Bai Jinyi will not lose."

That may be the case, but Jiang Shen did not actually care about the results of the match.

In the ring, the boxers were making final preparations before their match. The referee stood between the two, confirming their conditions. Westerners always liked to talk trash and issue challenges before a match, but no matter before or after, Bai Jinyi was never the type to talk much. With such individuality, Bai Jinyi had been given countless nicknames in American boxing magazines, such as 'pretty boy', or even 'beastly gentleman'.

Jiang Shen stood as close as possible to the ropes, looking up at the people in the ring. Having watched so many matches, he could also be considered half an insider. Jiang Shen could distinctly feel how Bai Jinyi's boxing had become even more exquisite compared to when he was in China. His footwork was swift, his dodging agile, and his opponent's punches pretty much never touched his face at all.

"He doesn't like to be hit in the face," said Su Fang, "he's much better than he was before, and now, every time he leaves the ring, his face is almost never injured. The media loves to focus on that point, calling him a 'pretty boy'."

Jiang Shen could somewhat understand why Bai Jinyi didn't want to injure his face. Besides, he always felt that Bai Jinyi, being such a proud, good-looking person, should never be beaten up. It was not just his face; if he lost even a single strand of hair, Jiang Shen's heart could not bear it.

Due to the huge difference in ability, Bai Jinyi landed a total knockout in the sixth round. After the judge finished his examination in the ring, he decided that although the other boxer was not completely unconscious, he was unable to continue the match, so he gave Bai Jinyi a decisive win.

"Nice!" yelled Su Fang, then pushed Jiang Shen up into the ring.

Bai Jinyi was leaning against the ropes. As expected, his face was completely uninjured, and he held his hand out to Jiang Shen.

Everyone around them were cheering loudly, and through the ropes, Bai Jinyi lifted Jiang Shen up into a hug. Cupping his face, Jiang Shen felt how sweaty he was.

"Isn't your hubby hot?" Bai Jinyi asked, looking up at him.

Jiang Shen bit his lip. He actually could not understand what the foreigners were all shouting about, and the only thing he could see and feel was Bai Jinyi. He tilted his head down, pressing his lips to the other boy's sweaty forehead, mumbling, "Super hot…"

Bai Jinyi seemed very satisfied. Hugging him, he refused to let go, until Su Fang climbed into the ring to yell at him to attend his post-match interview.

"Are you going to Ai Lai's studio now?" Bai Jinyi put Jiang Shen back down reluctantly. He climbed through the ropes. Mayweather was already waiting for him by the corridor.

Jiang Shen nodded. "The ancestor has already sent me the address."

Bai Jinyi turned around, once again hugging him firmly for a while. Swaying slightly, he said, "The driver will drop you off. Finish up as soon as possible and wait for me at home."

Unfortunately, amateur boxing matches were not recorded, and one had to wait until the next day to see what was asked in the interview. Jiang Shen did not understand English, but he still collected all related boxing magazines.

Ai Lai's studio was not very far. When Jiang Shen arrived, he was teaching in the large dance classroom on the second floor.

Just like back at Laiyi, Ai Lai did not dance, and only scolded people. Even after switching to English, his words did not slow down.

"You're here?" He was not surprised to see Jiang Shen. After acknowledging him, Ai Lai gestured at the people dancing to stop.

The difference between Caucasian and Asian physiques was still very apparent. Jiang Shen could not really tell how old these dancers were as Ai Lai introduced them to him. "Most of them are students from top dance universities within the States. Some hurried over from New York."

He pointed at Jiang Shen, speaking in English, "This is my student."

With the language barrier, Jiang Shen did not know what to do, other than maintaining a smile. Fortunately, the students seemed to be a lot busier than him, and after not much talking, they all dispersed and started practicing by themselves.

"They've all come to prepare for the competition." Ai Lai sat on the floor, eyeing Jiang Shen's bag. "What are you keeping inside there?"

Jiang Shen showed him. "Boxing magazines. Bai Jinyi's interviews are in them."

Ai Lai was speechless.

Jiang Shen had even brought scissors and glue, as well as a new notebook to paste Bai Jinyi's English nonsense flattery.

Ai Lai rubbed his forehead. "You came here to dance, not to cut out magazine articles."

Jiang Shen could only put his magazines away resentfully. Once he was done, he still refused to give up on the thought. "When I'm done dancing, can I cut them here?"

At a loss for words, Ai Lai gritted his teeth. "Your husband isn't going to jump off the pages, why are you in such a hurry?!"

In the past, Ai Lai had always been the one to anger people to death. Who knew that one day, he would be on the receiving end instead? Changing into his ballet shoes, Jiang Shen stood in front of him obediently and finally stopped mentioning the magazines.

"You've actually come to the States at a perfect time." Ai Lai's temper cooled off, and got down to business. "Prix de Lausanne is happening in January next year, and Shen Junyi has already registered you for it."

Jiang Shen was shocked. "W-what?!"

"Prix de Lausanne, a huge international ballet competition for dancers aged sixteen to eighteen. It'll be the first important international competition of your life."

Clearly, the words 'international', 'competition', and 'life' had smacked Jiang Shen into a daze. Counting on his fingers, he realized that there was less than three months to the competition.

Ai Lai looked at Jiang Shen's astounded expression and smiled very gently. "From now on, you'd better work hard, little baby swan."

When Bai Jinyi arrived at the apartment, the housekeeper had just finished preparing dinner, and was about to clock off. Not seeing Jiang Shen at the dining table, he frowned as he looked around.

"Mr. Jiang is in the living room, on the couch." The housekeeper smiled. "It's best that you be as quiet as possible; he seems to have fallen asleep."

Bai Jinyi raised a brow, his expression darkening a little. Changing into his indoor slippers, he walked to the living room. As expected, Jiang Shen was sprawled facedown on the couch.

The living room light wasn't on, and only a floor lamp glowed softly. The dim, yellow light was cast on top of Jiang Shen's head, gentle and peaceful. Softly, Bai Jinyi crept his way over to the couch. Looking down at him for a little while, he suddenly bent over, sniffing lightly at the back of Jiang Shen's neck.

Groggily, Jiang Shen stirred. He looked up, and when he saw Bai Jinyi, he thought he was still dreaming. Smiling foolishly, he said dreamily, “Hubby, you’re so handsome…”

Remaining bent over, Bai Jinyi did not move. His face was very close to Jiang Shen’s, and when he spoke, his breath brushed across the other boy’s cheek with each exhale.

“What did you call me?” He asked quietly.

Jiang Shen blinked. He finally woke up a little, and stammered, “Y-you’re home?”

Lifting a brow, Bai Jinyi stopped asking about his sleep talk. “Why did you fall asleep right after coming home? You’re not going to eat?”

Upon hearing the word ‘eat’, Jiang Shen’s expression immediately fell. He returned to his facedown position, his voice muffled by the seats.

“I ate boiled chicken. I can’t eat anything else anymore,” Jiang Shen said.

“Why?”

“I weighed myself at Second *Shifu*’s studio, and I’m heavier than I should be. From today onwards, I have to go on a diet.”

Bai Jinyi was not very happy, reaching out and pinching the back of his neck. “You’re on holiday now, and you don’t have to dance. You can just wait until you’re back before you start dieting.”

Jiang Shen shook his head fiercely. Lifting his head, he looked up at Bai Jinyi, sighing tragically, “Starting tomorrow, I have to go to Ai Lai’s studio to practice every day, because in January, I’ll be participating in the Prix de Lausanne.”

Bai Jinyi’s hand froze on the back of Jiang Shen’s neck.

Jiang Shen sighed gloomily, and said, his voice full of regrets, “I don’t even have time to cut out those nonsense flatteries of yours anymore. Life’s too hard.”

★

In an early Los Angeles morning, the rays of the rising sun scattered across the floor of the dance studio. Jiang Shen had already changed into his ballet shoes, and was holding onto the barre, practicing some basic ballet footwork. Fortunately for him, he was used to bringing along Laiyi’s uniform no matter where he went, because if he didn’t, he would’ve had trouble finding leotards in his size in the States.

Gradually, other students started streaming in one after another. Due to the language barrier, Jiang Shen had yet to become familiar with them despite having

been here for a few days already. However, dancing was something that was beyond nationalities, so they still managed to work together and inspire each other.

For example, there was a reddish brunette, Chils. His dancing style was similar to Liu Xingzhi's, his muscles well defined, and his limbs powerful. When lifting his female partner, Novie, his movements were elegant and relaxed, and their pas de deux was their entry for a competition next year in Vienna. They had sought out Ai Lai to help choreograph their dance, along with the storyline.

"Shen." When Chils and Jiang Shen talked to each other, there was a lot of gesturing and guessing. "Novie is on break today, so can you help me practice?" Chils acted out the female part, then made a cross with his arms, and pointed at Jiang Shen, holding out an arm in invitation.

Jiang Shen quickly realized what he was asking. "You want me to be your partner?"

Chils gave an exaggerated smile, the freckles on his nose all scrunching together. He was clearly very delighted, and thanked Jiang Shen repeatedly.

Of course Ai Lai heard the request as well. Holding his arm out, he gave Chils a warning look. "Only this once, Chils. Jiang Shen has his own work to do as well."

Chils feigned a pitiful look, before pulling Jiang Shen over to an empty space, and the two worked out the steps of the dance.

Due to practicing every day in the same studio, Jiang Shen was mostly familiar with Chils' and Novie's dance. His physique was not as dainty as Novie's, but he did not lose in flexibility.

The duet was a modern ballet performance of over ten minutes, and it was about a young, arguing couple, starting from conflict and ending in a reconciliation. For the female part, there was a lot of hands on hips, stomping of feet, and flipping of hair. Jiang Shen ran over it a few times, and when it came to the actual practice, he did it without any awkwardness, and with great poise.

"Wow," Chils could not help but sigh with feeling. He gave Jiang Shen a thumbs up, praising his dance partner enthusiastically.

Jiang Shen was still rather shy, but when working together, he was very serious. Other than Novie's individual parts, the dance also involved quite a number of lifts for Chils to show himself off. There was even a part where his partner would run towards him from a distance, then he would lift them up and spin them around in the air. Jiang Shen was a little uncertain if Chils would be able to lift him up.

"No problem!" Chils was very confident. Exaggeratedly, he posed like a bodybuilder, saying loudly, "I'm very strong!"

Jiang Shen gave him an OK sign. Taking in a deep breath, he bounced a couple of times, before running towards the other dancer. Chils caught his waist firmly, lifting him up into the air. Jiang Shen extended his arms, shifting himself into an

arabesque before turning and landing lightly. With the support of Chils' arms and shoulders, he maintained his balance, and finally, they ended in a hug, facing each other.

The 'arguing couple' finally reconciled. Jiang Shen and Chils had their faces right against each other, looking as though they were deep in love. The sight of this caused many students watching to start catcalling.

Chils put Jiang Shen back down. He was not embarrassed in the slightest, a classic example of an open, friendly, straight boy. Not concerned with whether or not Jiang Shen could understand him, he complimented him excitedly, "Shen! If you were a girl, I definitely would have fallen in love with you!"

Jiang Shen did not understand anything except for the word 'love'. After connecting Chils' expression with what he said, Jiang Shen was shocked, and immediately pulled himself out of the character, denying him in a hurry. "You can't love me, I have someone else I love, and I love him very much."

Naturally, Chils could not understand what he was saying. Despite so many 'love's being thrown around, he was unconcerned, and hugged Jiang Shen again with great enthusiasm. Holding back a laugh, Ai Lai gestured at Jiang Shen to come over.

"He's complimenting you," Ai Lai explained. Handing Jiang Shen a list of pieces, he told him, "Pick one."

Jiang Shen accepted the list from Ai Lai. "What's this?"

"The list of music for the Prix de Lausanne. They're all for solos, choose one."

The pieces listed were all from famous ballets, and all had a similar degree of difficulty and renown. Choreography and arrangement, however, was the job of the dancer and their teacher.

Frowning, Jiang Shen looked through them all, but still had no clue what to choose.

"You can go home and look through them slowly," Ai Lai said breezily, "I'll email you videos of past Prix de Lausanne performances tonight, and you can look through them for reference. Choreographing a dance is not something that can be learned in a night, so don't put too much pressure on yourself."

On this side was the tranquility and elegance of a dance studio, so naturally, on the other side, the boxing gym was filled with bloodthirst and savagery.

Dressed in a black tank top hoodie, Bai Jinyi was swiftly punching at the sandbag in front of him. Upon seeing him, Senbu was astonished.

"I thought you'd be on break." Senbu switched between the two languages effortlessly when speaking to Bai Jinyi. Although Bai Jinyi did not have much of an

issue listening to English now, he still did not like to speak it. “Where’s your Little Swan?”

Bai Jinyi glared at him from under his hood. With a loud thud, his fist landed powerfully on the sandbag.

Senbu watched silently as the chains of the sandbag swung back and forth.

Throwing his hood back, Bai Jinyi sat down by the side, ripping open the straps of his gloves with his teeth. With a calm voice, he said, “I’m not on break anymore. There are four more amateur matches coming up, and I’m fighting them all.”

There was nothing else for Senbu to say. “Alright.”

Secretly, he felt that Bai Jinyi’s opponents in the next four matches should start praying and see if they had offended some Chinese deity.

“Next year, you’ll be able to start officially preparing to join the professional circles,” Senbu said, “so this year, you don’t have to fight so hard.”

Bai Jinyi responded, “Entering the professional circle means a brand-new start, and there are still quite a number of years before I’ll be able to get the gold belt.” Tossing his gloves into his bag, he drank some water. “Every match I fight now is an accumulation of experience before I step into the professional ring. I need to become even stronger.”

Senbu laughed. “Come on, how many eighteen year olds have actually managed to step into the professional boxing circle of the United States? Plus, you’re Chinese. That’s way too ambitious. What exactly are you thinking?”

Bai Jinyi packed his bag. He did not plan on changing, and the collar of his shirt was dark with sweat. Swinging his bag across one shoulder, he stuck his hands in his pockets, looking down at Senbu from above. “I want to become the first Chinese welterweight grand slam champion. I want to stand on the highest peak and become an unparalleled hero.”

Speechless, Senbu swallowed heavily.

Bai Jinyi turned away, speaking indifferently, “Let’s go, drive me back to my apartment.”

Although he already knew where Bai Jinyi lived, Senbu still could not help but feel a strong twist of jealousy inside him. After all, most of the boxers in the United States grew up in poverty. They needed to stand out from the crowd and lift themselves up from their low socioeconomic background. The path of boxing was tough, but they were able to carve a way out for themselves with their youth, flesh, and blood.

But Bai Jinyi, who was considered rich no matter where he was, chose to step into the boxing ring. He could definitely be considered unorthodox.

Senbu dropped him off at the entrance to his apartment. After confirming the time for their next training session, the coach could not help but ask again, “Is Little Swan really living with you?”

Bai Jinyi was baffled. “You want me to get him to come out here?”

Senbu waved his hands. “No, I mean, you’re currently in the honeymoon stage of your relationship, right? Having spent so much time apart, and now that you’ve finally reunited, shouldn’t the two of you be enjoying your time alone together?”

Americans had always been very open about sex. In their eyes, youths around the age of seventeen or eighteen should be full of vigour. During the days where their lover was by their side, they should be saying hi to condoms every day.

Bai Jinyi raised a brow, the temperature of his voice dropping. “He sleeps on the couch in my living room every night.”

Senbu widened his eyes in surprise. After a long time, he finally mustered up his courage, asking incredulously, “Bai Jinyi, can you not get it up?”

Bai Jinyi was left speechless.

★

At first, Jiang Shen sleeping on the couch was not something Bai Jinyi had given any thought to.

The apartment was over a hundred square meters. Although it was not extremely large, it still had three rooms — the coatroom, the bedroom, and another that had been converted into a gym. Bai Jinyi and Jiang Shen were both professional athletes, and such an arrangement was suitable for the both of them. However, for some reason, ever since the first day, when Jiang Shen fell asleep on the couch due to jet lag, he seemed to have decided that the couch would be his permanent home, and didn’t show any signs of wanting to move into Bai Jinyi’s room.

“Why aren’t you sleeping on the bed?” This was not the first time Bai Jinyi had asked this question.

Jiang Shen replied, faltering, “I have to wake up early in the morning to practice… I’m afraid I’ll disturb you.”

At the time, Bai Jinyi was chewing on a piece of beef. He froze slightly, and after a long time, he finally said slowly, “You won’t be disturbing me.”

Despite saying that, Jiang Shen still did not move into his room that night. In the middle of the night, as he lay on his bed, Bai Jinyi stared at the door of his bedroom for quite a while. In the end, he had no choice but to close his eyes in slight frustration.

The housekeeper normally left once she finished making dinner, but ever since Jiang Shen started to go on a diet, lots of American foods such butter or candy disappeared from the fridge. As Jiang Shen shredded his chicken at the dining table, a smile instantly appeared on his face the moment he saw Bai Jinyi. “You’re back?”

Bai Jinyi nodded, his gaze falling to Jiang Shen’s legs. The other boy was still wearing his ballet shoes, one of his feet pointed. Rhythmically, he tapped his foot up and down on the floor, then switched over to his other foot after a while, continuing the same pattern.

“Do you want beef or chicken?” Jiang Shen asked.

Bai Jinyi leaned in close, placing a hand on his back. Jiang Shen jerked slightly, but did not shy away. A blush spread up the back of his neck slowly.

Bai Jinyi saw all of this happen, but without a change in expression, he said, “Chicken.”

“Oh,” said Jiang Shen. He sped up his shredding, no longer practicing his footwork as he stood properly by the table.

Bai Jinyi watched him shred for a little while, then suddenly asked, “What did you do today?”

“I have to choose my competition piece, then I have to choreograph it. I haven’t decided yet.”

Frowning, Bai Jinyi grumbled, “You sure are busy…”

Jiang Shen laughed. “You go ahead and rest earlier tonight, you don’t have to bother with me.”

Bai Jinyi glanced at him, but did not respond. Jiang Shen’s blanket was still piled up on the living room couch, clearly having been slept in.

“Do you want to drink something first?” Seeing him stare at the couch, Jiang Shen felt a little awkward, and tried to change the topic. “I bought strawberry juice today.”

Bai Jinyi pursed his lips. Letting go of Jiang Shen, he turned to open the fridge. As expected, there were two bottles of fresh strawberry juice, so he took one out, walking as he twisted the cap open.

Jiang Shen secretly sighed in relief, mixing the shredded chicken into some lettuce. Upon looking up, he saw Bai Jinyi standing in front of the couch, waving the bottle in his hand.

Jiang Shen looked puzzled.

Bai Jinyi moved extremely slowly. The turn of his wrist seemed to be in slow motion, and it was as though the strawberry juice even got a close up as it spilled out of the bottle. The red liquid was like a blooming flower, spreading across the couch and blanket in large swathes.

"Oops." Expressionlessly, Bai Jinyi lifted the bottle, tilted his head back, and finished the rest of the juice. Casually, he said, "We'll get the housekeeper to wash it tomorrow, you'll sleep in my room tonight."

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Obviously, it wasn't easy to clean the dark, sticky, red liquid, so Jiang Shen could only place the dirty blanket and seat cover to the side. The scent of the strawberry juice permeated through the air, and even the chicken, cooked without any salt or oil, seemed to taste sweet.

He dared not look at Bai Jinyi, who was seated across the table, but he could clearly feel that the boy was in a very good mood. He was even scrolling through Weibo as he ate, which was something he rarely did.

"Umm, after washing… will it dry tomorrow?" After eating, Jiang Shen seemed to have finally found his nerve. Mustering up the courage, he asked, "I still need to sleep there."

Bai Jinyi lifted a brow, a little unhappy. "You want to sleep there? That couch's too big, it's taking up too much space. I'm going to change it out tomorrow."

This time, Jiang Shen's blush spread from his neck all the way to his face, and he murmured, "I'm scared I won't be able to fall asleep if I sleep with you…"

Bai Jinyi pretended not to hear. Turning his phone towards Jiang Shen, he pointed at a video. "You're on Weibo. Go take a look at your super topic."

Jiang Shen did not know what he was pointing to. Opening his Weibo, he tapped on his super topic.

The most popular post today was a video of him dancing in the studio, and the other star of the video was Chils, who had been practicing with him.

Bai Jinyi seemed to have watched the video once already. Resting his face in his hand, he expanded the video and replayed it.

"You were playing the role of his girlfriend?" He asked while watching.

Jiang Shen was watching too, and said, rather unconcerned, "It's practice. We need to be able to dance any role, no matter what it is. Look at this lift, isn't it very impressive?"

"He lifted you up?"

Jiang Shen nodded. “Yup.”

Bai Jinyi fell silent again as he continued to watch. After some time, he said mildly, “I can lift you up as well.”

Jiang Shen looked completely baffled. “Huh?”

“Like how he lifted you up.” Bai Jinyi extended his arms, copying the movement he saw on the screen, slowly lifting his arms. “I can do it too. Do you want to try?”

Jiang Shen actually wasn’t very sure how the situation had developed this way.

After eating and doing the dishes, the two of them took a shower. Entering the bedroom, Bai Jinyi had yet to forget about the lift. He stood by the bed, looking very stubborn. “You can run towards me.”

Jiang Shen didn’t know whether to laugh or cry as he coaxed Bai Jinyi gently, “You’ve never been trained professionally. You can’t just lift people up like this.”

Bai Jinyi did not speak, only holding his arms out.

Jiang Shen had no other choice. Dressed in a simple T-shirt and shorts, he played along, jogging forward a few steps. When he reached Bai Jinyi, the other boy gripped his waist with no hesitation.

Surprised, Jiang Shen felt a weightlessness, then his plane of vision was suddenly shifted upwards. Effortlessly, he was lifted above Bai Jinyi’s head. To maintain his balance, he supported himself on the other boy’s shoulders.

Bai Jinyi looked up at him.

Jiang Shen swallowed. “Umm… Spin around once?”

Holding him up, Bai Jinyi slowly rotated once where he stood.

Jiang Shen laughed.

Unable to stop himself, Bai Jinyi asked, “What are you laughing about?”

“Nothing.” Jiang Shen coughed lightly. He let go of Bai Jinyi’s shoulders slowly. Puffing up his chest, he extended his arms, and straightened his legs, giving all of his weight over to Bai Jinyi.

Bai Jinyi continued to hold Jiang Shen in a lift. From his angle, he could observe Jiang Shen’s posture clearly, from the line of his neck to his shoulders, then to his arms, chest, as well as the mesmerizing lines of his abs. Jiang Shen was like a beautiful, elegant swan, curving his regal neck.

He gestured at Bai Jinyi to put him back down slowly. Then he reached out, gently looping his arms around the other boy’s neck. His face was extremely close

to Bai Jinyi's, and was almost hanging from his body.

Lowering his eyes, Jiang Shen's gaze drifted across Bai Jinyi's lips. Slowly, he tilted his head to the side, and pressed his own lips gently against them.

At first, Bai Jinyi did not open his mouth. After Jiang Shen kissed him for a while, Bai Jinyi finally asked softly, "Are you also this close to others when you dance with them?"

Jiang Shen held his laughter back. "How is that possible… We only position ourselves to look like we're that close."

Grumbling, Bai Jinyi held the back of Jiang Shen's head as he bit the other boy's probing tongue somewhat savagely.

Having been bitten, Jiang Shen was a little shocked. He hissed in pain, a slight frown appearing on his face, and glared at Bai Jinyi resentfully.

The latter didn't seem to be bothered at all. With Jiang Shen's tongue in his mouth, he still continued asking, "Why do you not want to sleep with me?"

Jiang Shen didn't want to answer. Kissing Bai Jinyi, he thought about how to evade the question.

Obviously, Bai Jinyi would not let him get away so easily. Turning around, he pressed Jiang Shen down into the bed.

In this position, they were pressed against each other very intimately, and their reactions were completely exposed to each other.

Jiang Shen wasn't sure if he was feeling awkward, or if the overwhelming embarrassment had made him angry. Pushing against Bai Jinyi's chest, he said, "Get up."

Bai Jinyi, of course, noticed the key issue. No matter how much the other boy struggled, he forced his thigh between Jiang Shen's legs.

Jiang Shen did not know how to react.

Bai Jinyi never expected Jiang Shen to get hard so quickly. A little surprised, he murmured, "You're that sensitive?"

Jiang Shen decided to just close his eyes. Due to his face burning too brightly, even the skin around the corners of his eyes were tinged pink. Perhaps because he felt that this was too embarrassing, he even curled his toes.

Jiang Shen was also unable to explain his own vigorous reaction. Although boys who danced ballet could be considered to be more sensitive towards such private matters, as soon as he faced Bai Jinyi, Jiang Shen felt that it was even more difficult to control his own reactions.

This was why he was unwilling to share a bed with Bai Jinyi. Ever since he arrived in the States and watched Bai Jinyi's match for the first time over here, Jiang Shen felt that everything was now different.

Bai Jinyi was now a true man. His skin, muscles, facial features, voice, as well as the way he looked at him, made Jiang Shen shake, his blood rushing during his occasional daydreams.

He did not mature too late sexually, but to share the same bed with the object of his fantasies, yet do nothing, was too stimulating for his heart.

Bai Jinyi seemed to think that Jiang Shen's embarrassment was extremely adorable. As he slowly ground the lower parts of their bodies together, he said in a low voice, "What are you feeling embarrassed about? I'm also hard."

Jiang Shen was finally willing to open his eyes again. Breathlessly, he asked, "T-then, what do we do…?"

Bai Jinyi frowned. He was not very happy, and said, annoyed, "You still have to go to the studio tomorrow."

Jiang Shen blinked.

Bai Jinyi asked, "Can you not request a day off?"

Stammering, Jiang Shen said, "T-the ancestor… w-will scold me…" He paused, then asked a little placatingly, "H-how about… I use my mouth?"

Bai Jinyi did not show any appreciation for his suggestion at all, and said fiercely instead, "You even know about blowjobs? Where did you learn that from?"

Mewling and whimpering, Jiang Shen refused to say.

Bai Jinyi flipped him around, removing his pants, then smacking him on the ass a few times. "You've learned to be naughty."

Jiang Shen buried his head in the pillows, and the tips of his ears that were peeking out were bright red. Soft moans spilled from his throat, unclear whether from pain or pleasure, as he kept pleading, "N-no, I wasn't naughty, I looked it up myself…"

Bai Jinyi finally stopped questioning where he learned it from. He made Jiang Shen flip back over, the two of them pressing against each other in a tight embrace once more, locked in a passionate kiss. Reaching out, Bai Jinyi wrapped his hand around both their erections, jerking them both off together. In no time, Jiang Shen came.

His cum spurted over and over again onto Bai Jinyi's abdomen. The latter did not think it was dirty, only rubbing around it to prevent it from spilling everywhere. Soon after that, he also came on Jiang Shen's inner thighs.

★

Young people, upon having their first taste of sex, would usually start to yearn for more, unable to get enough of it. The next day, when the two of them woke up in each other's embrace, face to face, Bai Jinyi searched for Jiang Shen's lips groggily. He was always in a bad mood when waking up, so even his kisses were forceful. Jiang Shen only discovered that his lips had been kissed swollen when he was brushing his teeth later.

Bai Jinyi poured two glasses of milk, drinking as he watched Jiang Shen leave the bathroom after washing his face. The other boy's fringe hadn't yet dried, still wet and dripping. A white towel hung around his neck. Occasionally, Jiang Shen would wipe his hair with it casually. Beads of water rolled down, collecting in the curves of his collarbones, clear like crystal.

Jiang Shen still seemed to be a little embarrassed, and he dared not look at Bai Jinyi openly. Shooting him secret glances occasionally, he dilly-dallied as he finished his milk.

"What time do you finish class today?" Bai Jinyi asked.

Jiang Shen thought for a moment. "I should be able to leave at the usual time."

Nodding, Bai Jinyi told him, "I'll come pick you up."

Jiang Shen was quite happy, his smile stretched wide as he chuckled. Amused, Bai Jinyi reached out to wipe the damp spot on his collarbones.

Jiang Shen shrank back a little. "That tickles…"

Clasping his neck, Bai Jinyi lowered his head. "Kiss me."

Jiang Shen cupped Bai Jinyi's face, pressing a kiss forcefully into Bai Jinyi's lips, making a delightful sound.

In Ai Lai's dance studio, Chils' dance partner, Novie, finally came to class. Unlike her enthusiastic, unrestrained partner, Novie was aloof, dainty, and beautiful. She had evidently seen the video of Jiang Shen dancing that day, and for once, engaged in a rare conversation with him.

"Novie asked you how many years you've been dancing," Ai Lai translated.

Without waiting for Jiang Shen's response, Ai Lai replied in English, "He started dancing when he was eight."

There was a hint of envy on Novie's face, before she quickly reverted to her usual haughty expression and said, "I won't lose to you." Turning, she went back to stand by Chils' side.

Jiang Shen did not understand a single word. "What did she say?"

In a good mood, Ai Lai laughed. He looked at Jiang Shen, explaining, “Novie officially started learning modern ballet very late. She had been frequently ill as a child, and the doctors even said she would not live past twenty.”

The astonishment was evident on Jiang Shen’s face, and he looked towards the young lady who was currently holding onto the barre and practicing going en pointe.

“There are dancers of different physiques, skin colors, as well as ages here.” Ai Lai patted Jiang Shen’s head. It was rare to see such a pleasant look on his face. “Just like you, they’re using their lives to love ballet.”

Jiang Shen watched for a while, silent. Suddenly, he lifted his head, speaking earnestly, “If I meet her at an international competition in the future, I won’t lose to her.”

Ai Lai raised a brow in surprise. His smile widened and he winked cheekily. “What a coincidence. Novie thinks the same as well.”

After selecting a piece for the Prix de Lausanne, choreography and practice came next. Ai Lai watched as Jiang Shen performed a few basic grand jetés and pirouettes, then asked suddenly, “You’re sleeping in the same bed as Bai Jinyi now?”

Jiang Shen stumbled, and in the midst of practicing his grand rond de jambe jeté, his foot nearly scraped across the floor.

Ai Lai was left wordless.

Jiang Shen said, blush spreading across his face, “We didn’t do anything…”

Ai Lai nearly vomited blood. He sneered, “Who are you trying to deceive?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he felt an immense headache. “I don’t care. Listen to me. There’s still slightly over two months left to practice. Don’t do anything reckless. Tell Bai Jinyi to keep it in his pants!”

Jiang Shen did not know how to respond.

When Bai Jinyi came by in the afternoon to pick Jiang Shen up, Ai Lai’s eyes seemed like chastity belts, wrapping around Jiang Shen. Outsiders rarely appeared in the studio, and together with how Bai Jinyi carried himself, many students’ eyes could not help but be drawn to him as he entered.

With his arms crossed, Ai Lai looked stern. “The Prix de Lausanne is very important. The two of you had better not do anything foolish.”

Raising a brow, Bai Jinyi looked at Jiang Shen, only to see Little Swan with his head down, staring at his toes, an image of bashfulness and guilt.

“Especially you.” Ai Lai jabbed at Bai Jinyi, not holding back. “Abstain! Abstain, understand?!”

Bai Jinyi believed that Jiang Shen had not ‘tattled’ to Ai Lai, but in front of such a seasoned devil, Jiang Shen was basically a piece of paper that could be read in a single glance. There was no point for him to even struggle.

Bai Jinyi really had changed the couch in the living room to a small chaise lounge. With complicated emotions, Jiang Shen stood beside it for a little while. When walking past, Bai Jinyi even mocked him, “Why don’t you lie down and try it out?”

Jiang Shen tried to hold himself back, but he still retorted, “We have to abstain…”

Bai Jinyi laughed enigmatically. “If you don’t get hard, I won’t do anything to you.”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Other than the chaise lounge, Bai Jinyi also remodelled the bathroom, replacing the existing shower with a huge jacuzzi with four roman columns. Jiang Shen only discovered this luxurious, extravagant, new toy when he was about to take a shower.

To the side, Bai Jinyi finished brushing his teeth. Removing his shirt, he bent over, filling the tub. The angle showed off his eight-pack and the well defined ‘V’ of his hips perfectly.

“The weather’s getting colder. It’ll take too long if we bathe separately.” Whether it was his expression, or his reasons, Bai Jinyi left no room for criticism. “Soaking in a bath and having the jets massage your muscles is so nice.”

Jiang Shen wanted to die. “T-together?”

Bai Jinyi chuckled. Leaning down towards Jiang Shen’s ear, his voice was husky and flirtatious. “I’ll watch.”

Jiang Shen’s brain short circuited.

Although Ai Lai’s warning to abstain was directed at Bai Jinyi, Jiang Shen felt that he was the one who actually needed the warning.

Regardless of whether or not it was on purpose, these past few days, Bai Jinyi stopped wearing a shirt in the apartment, no matter what he was doing. After exercising, his chest remained unclothed, a thin layer of sweat covering his well defined muscles. When he tilted his head back to drink water, his throat bobbed, and beads of sweat came rolling down.

Jiang Shen felt a warm wetness flowing from his nose. He only realized that his nose was bleeding when Bai Jinyi looked over.

Not knowing what to say, Jiang Shen searched for some tissues hastily.

Striding forward, Bai Jinyi stepped over the coffee table. Pressing Jiang Shen's forehead, he pushed him down flat on the chaise lounge.

"Don't let the blood drip down." Amusement filled Bai Jinyi's voice. Turning around, he pulled out the first aid kit from a drawer, rolling up a cotton ball and stuffing it into Jiang Shen's nose.

Jiang Shen licked his lips, mumbling, "It tastes like rusty iron…"

Face to face, Bai Jinyi slowly wiped the blood under his nose clean. Looking at Jiang Shen for a little while, Bai Jinyi suddenly lowered his head, sticking his tongue out and licking lightly at Jiang Shen's upper lip.

"It really does taste like rusty iron," Bai Jinyi said mildly.

After that, he lowered his head again, and kissed Jiang Shen.

They had shared many kisses before, but every kiss seemed to have a different flavor.

Their first kiss was amongst the sea of flowers; the fresh scent of dirt after spring rain mingling with the kiss. During a quiet night in the village, they kissed, gazing into each other's eyes, the scent of the rice paddy fields surrounding them. Even more were the kisses mixed with the flavor of milk and strawberry toothpaste, as well as countless ones flavored with the leather of boxing gloves and the salt of sweat.

Dazed, Jiang Shen opened his mouth, the taste of iron melting into the tip of his tongue, somehow still a little sweet.

Reaching out with his hands, Bai Jinyi touched Jiang Shen's face before sliding down to the back of his neck. Cradling Jiang Shen's head and tilting it up, he did not stop kissing him. Jiang Shen grabbed at Bai Jinyi's grown out hair, tugging on it gently.

"I'm hard…" mumbled Jiang Shen in embarrassment, conceding defeat.

Bai Jinyi snorted. He did not do anything, only pecking at Jiang Shen's lips, enamored. "You said it yourself, we have to abstain."

Jiang Shen was speechless.

★

In the end, with all the abstaining, there was no place for Jiang Shen to release his desire. As such, he could only put in even greater effort to practice. None of the situations that Ai Lai had originally feared came to pass, and he was even in slight disbelief over it.

The date of the competition drew closer, and Ai Lai became even more nervous than Jiang Shen. One day after class, he suggested to Jiang Shen, "Do you want to video call Shen Junyi?"

"I just called *Shifu* last night."

"Did he say anything?"

Jiang Shen glanced at him. "*Shifu* just said to listen to you."

Ai Lai was left speechless, but still said in the end, "Then you should video call Liu Xingzhi. He has a lot of experience with such big competitions."

To put Ai Lai at ease, once Jiang Shen finished his practice, he really did video call Liu Xingzhi. The call was accepted very quickly, and the senior, frowning with his straight nose and deep-set eyes, appeared on his screen.

"What do you want?" Liu Xingzhi's tone never changed, and even his expression was grumpy. His dreadlocks lay across his shoulders, and they seemed longer than how Jiang Shen remembered them to be.

Jiang Shen greeted him warmly, "Hi, *Shixiong*!"

There was a look of disdain in Liu Xingzhi's eyes. "Get to the point."

"I'm going to participate in the Prix de Lausanne!"

Liu Xingzhi clicked his tongue. "Look how proud you are. You got the gold medal?"

Jiang Shen said in embarrassment, "No… Has *Shixiong* participated before?"

Liu Xingzhi gloated, "I won the gold medal two years ago. This year, I'll be competing in Vienna. You're still quite a distance away from me."

With great sincerity, Jiang Shen exclaimed, "*Shixiong*, you're too amazing!"

There seemed to be something stuck in Liu Xingzhi's throat. He looked as though he wanted to say something, yet forcefully held himself back. Finally, he gave up and asked Jiang Shen, "Are you feeling nervous because of the competition?"

Jiang Shen blinked. "I'm actually feeling fine… But Second *Shifu* is afraid that I'll be nervous, and wants me to ask you for tips."

Liu Xingzhi was speechless.

Asking for tips ended up being a futile effort, but the two gossiped rather happily. Liu Xingzhi also knew Chils and Novie, especially Novie. They had actually crossed paths quite a few times before.

"She has congenital heart disease," said Liu Xingzhi, "the first time I met her was in Helsinki, and she was the most outstanding female dancer there. Many expected her to win the gold. Classical ballet has always been reigned by the ladies, and if a ballet enthusiast, regardless of male or female, had thirty dancers that they liked, twenty-five of them would be female."

"Like *Shijie*?"

Liu Xingzhi spoke a little sourly, "Jing Luoyun has more fans than you and I combined. The haters call 'The Fairies of Paradise' the 'Queen of Locusts'. Once the locusts arrive, not even a single blade of grass can remain, got it?"

Jiang Shen had no response to that, only feeling that even the nickname used to insult these pretty ladies was too cool.

Liu Xingzhi continued, "Novie did not manage to finish the competition. Halfway through, she had a heart attack and was sent to the hospital." He paused for a moment before continuing, "The last time I saw her was two years ago in Lausanne. I was sixteen, and she was eighteen. Due to her age, that was the last chance for her to participate in the Prix de Lausanne. The results were as I told you just now: I won."

Jiang Shen sighed. He sat down on the floor, cross-legged, and his expression was serious, but did not speak.

Liu Xingzhi said carelessly, "I thought you'd blame me for not letting her win."

Jiang Shen said earnestly, "*Shixiong*, you're not that type of person, and neither is Novie."

Liu Xingzhi chuckled. Resting his head on his palm, he looked at Jiang Shen. "There are quite a number of people from Laiyi participating as well, from the third floor."

Jiang Shen took a deep breath. He was finally starting to feel a little nervous.

Liu Xingzhi continued, "Zhou Luoxiang will participating in the competition at Vienna as well." There was a look of defiance in his eyes, like a hawk in the grasslands patrolling the skies. "Last time, I lost to him in Moscow. This time, I'm bringing back the gold."

"Just go and dance, Jiang Shen."

Liu Xingzhi's voice traveled to him from thousands of miles away, through mountains and rivers, from the other side of the ocean.

"Dance out your passion, advance continuously, respect your opponents, and triumph over them."

The snow had yet to melt at the end of Januray in Switzerland. Jiang Shen sat alone in the car that Ai Lai had rented. Leaning against the window, he looked at the red roofs and white walls of the European-styled buildings lining the streets.

As Lausanne was on the north bank of Lake Geneva, it was right across the lake from the French city, Évian. From Geneva Airport, it was only about a half hour car ride. Other than being by the lake, Jura Mountains was north of this old city. Situated by mountains and lakes, the history of this city could be traced all the way back to ancient times.

Ai Lai was like an old father sending his child off to *gaokao*. Throughout the entire journey, he never stopped talking. He would mention how they pretty much only spoke French in Lausanne, and that it would be best if Jiang Shen learned a few phrases, then he would jump to asking him if he wanted to visit the museums and cathedrals in the area.

Jiang Shen asked, "Can I go today?"

Ai Lai paused. "Maybe it's better if we go after the competition."

Jiang Shen pouted childishly and texted Bai Jinyi with his head down.

Due to unfortunate timing, over the next few days, Bai Jinyi would be fighting in the few most important amateur matches before stepping onto the professional stage. This would be the first time they were both missing out on each other's milestones.

After sending the text, Jiang Shen looked up to see a ballet poster hanging by the street. Ai Lai glanced at the GPS then said, "We're at the Lausanne Train Station already, less than two kilometers to the Beaulieu Theatre. Don't be nervous."

Jiang Shen didn't have the guts to say that he was actually not nervous at all, so he responded obediently, "Mn."

The Beaulieu Theatre was an elderly, gentlemanly 'grandfather'. Its location was not ostentatious, situated in the midst of an ordinary neighborhood. Ai Lai parked the car and led Jiang Shen to the back entrance of the theatre. A small blackboard had been positioned there, and 'Entrée des Artistes' was written on it.

Ai Lai exhaled slowly. "Go on in, little artiste."

The Prix de Lausanne was a B Grade competition in the international ballet circle. To the students of Laiyi Studio, this competition was not something to sweat over. However, as one of the judges, Shen Junyi had to be present.

From a distance, Ai Lai saw his senior, still dressed in his usual, ethereal white, his facial features sharp and distinct, without expression or desire.

Shen Junyi turned, pausing slightly when he caught sight of Ai Lai and Jiang Shen.

Jiang Shen didn't even try to avoid any suspicion of bias or unfairness. He greeted, "*Shifu*."

Shen Junyi walked over.

"Have you reserved a place to stay?" Shen Junyi asked Ai Lai.

"Yes. How many students did you bring this time?"

"Sixteen."

Ai Lai pursed his lips, grumbling, "You sure brought a lot. You don't hesitate at all about snatching any accolades from your direct disciple, huh?"

Shen Junyi knew that Ai Lai rarely said anything nice, and was not bothered. Carefully looking over Jiang Shen, his expression turned gentle. "You've grown taller again."

Jiang Shen scratched the back of his head shyly, then heard Shen Junyi ask suddenly, "Do you have the confidence to win?"

The boy did not speak, but his face split in a grin, and he nodded firmly.

Los Angeles, 3pm.

After replying to the final message on his phone, Bai Jinyi saw Su Fang walk in.

"The third last match in your amateur career." She waved the book in her hand. "Up until now, you've had eighty-one wins and six losses."

After pulling his gloves on, Bai Jinyi stood up. Behind him, Senbu placed his boxing robe over his shoulders.

"I will win all the upcoming matches." Bai Jinyi swung his fist.

Su Fang laughed. "What about your pre-match prayer?"

With his back to her, Bai Jinyi raised his arm. A white ribbon from a ballet shoe was tied around his wrist.

Jiang Shen had already changed into his leotard and ballet shoes. When tidying up his bag, he found his very first pair. Zhang Zhi was right next to him, and he watched as Jiang Shen held the pair of shoes, murmuring something under his breath.

“What are you doing?” Zhang Zhi could not help but ask.

Jiang Shen turned and smiled at him. “A pre-competition prayer.”

Zhang Zhi leaned closer and said, surprised. “This shoe is missing a ribbon. Did you cut it?”

Jiang Shen put away the shoes, doing a few warmups, and nodded. “I gave it to someone.”

Zhang Zhi’s face was full of confusion.

Jiang Shen did not explain. He patted Zhang Zhi’s back. The judges up front had already called out his competition number.

In the boxing gym, Bai Jinyi looked up. His gold boxing robe slid down from his shoulders, and the spotlight above the boxing ring shone upon his head.

Jiang Shen took a deep breath. He extended both his arms and spun out from where he stood backstage. Then, he leapt into a grand jeté, flying onto the stage, into the glorious expanse of light.

## Chapter 12 — Never Hesitate

Lunar New Year had just passed in the village. The air of festivity had yet to recede, but the little rental bookstore by the bus stop had already opened.

The old man didn't have much to do, so he woke up early in the morning, shovelling snow off the road and getting in some exercise at the same time. Once he was finished, the children who had woken up early to collect red packets came running over.

"*Yeye*! *Yeye!*" The children, aged seven or eight, were filled with energy. Very few of them were quiet the way Jiang Shen was when he was a child. The old man let them into the store, and even lit up a brazier, afraid that they would be cold.

"Do you guys want candy?" The old man asked.

The children were all dressed in cotton-padded jackets, looking like little puff balls. "Yes!"

Taking out some nougat, the old man gave them out. As the young ones started to enjoy their candy, they all scurried inside the store to read comics, while the old man lay down in his seat inside the door, baking comfortably in the warmth of the sun.

His smartphone was slow and stuttering due to all the photos stored within. Weibo took longer to open now, but the old man was in no hurry. He put on his glasses, squinting as he searched for the super topic he was following. Tapping into it, the page took a while to load, as a child called loudly from inside, "*Yeye*! Where can I find the *Little Hero* comic?"

The old man said impatiently, "Where did you put it last time?" Despite saying so, he still went inside to find the book for the child.

The Weibo super topic finally loaded, and the old man saw the current, most popular post pinned to the top.

"The result for the Prix de Lausanne is out! Everyone, come and look for our Little Swan quickly!"

The old man blinked, not understanding what 'Lausanne' was. When looking through the comments, he saw someone mentioning it.

"The Prix de Lausanne: [Link] This is the official site where the results are announced, but it's in French. Kneeling and praying for a French major to explain!"

Exclaiming in surprise, the old man stood up suddenly.

A child reading comics not far away was startled. Looking up, they asked, puzzled, "*Yeye*, what's wrong?"

The old man did not answer, instead running inside, trembling, to rummage through his cabinets. In the end, he only found an English dictionary, and sighed in great disappointment.

Running back out again, he put on his scarf and hat. While leaving, he suddenly remembered something and turned around, threatening the children fiercely, "Behave and read your books! Don't make any trouble, otherwise I won't return your book rental deposits!"

The children were too shocked to respond.

Usually, the asphalt road into the village did not seem long at all, but once there was something urgent, the distance seemed to stretch on forever. The old man was getting on in age, and walking fast was quite a lot of effort for him. Leaning against the willow tree by the road, he panted for a while. He was about to continue walking, when a car suddenly honked behind him.

Chen Maoxiu rolled down his window. Sitting in the driver seat, he called out to the old man, "*Yeye*, why are you here?!"

The old man looked at him as though his savior had just arrived. "Q-quick, drive me to the Jiang's place!"

Shen Shubao climbed down from the passenger seat to help the old man into the car, asking hurriedly, "What happened?"

The old man got into the car, urging Chen Maoxiu to drive quickly. He squeezed through from between the two front seats and took his phone out, showing it to Shen Shubao. "The Prix de Lausanne. Shen-*zi* participated in the competition and the results are out. I don't know French, so I don't understand what I'm reading. Shubao, you've studied so much, you're very clever, can you understand this?"

This was the first time Shen Shubao had heard about this. This year, when Jiang Shen said he wasn't coming home for the New Year, they had long since gotten used to it. Over the phone, the younger boy hadn't mentioned anything about a competition, so they did not think it would be a big deal.

Accepting the old man's phone, he opened the official website for the competition. As expected, a long list of names was displayed. Because they could not understand what was written, Shen Shubao could only take his phone out and translate word by word.

While driving, Chen Maoxiu asked anxiously, "What are the results?"

After translating for some time, Shen Shubao finally said, "This is the list of competitors for the preliminaries. There are a total of nineteen countries, with eighty competitors." He continued scrolling down, and saw a comparatively shorter list. "These are the competitors for the finals, and there are only twenty names in total."

The old man asked nervously, “Is Shen-*zi* on it?”

Shen Shubao looked at the names one by one. How Chen Maoxiu was driving was a mystery, because before they had even arrived at their destination, he slammed on the brakes. The old man yelped in surprise, and Shen Shubao was nearly thrown into the windshield. Angrily, he said, “Goumao! Drive properly! I haven’t found his name yet!”

Chen Maoxiu yelled, “I’m anxious too! Don’t you see the ducks crossing the road ahead?”

In the middle of the asphalt road, a big duck led a line of little ducklings across, flapping its wings as it waddled haphazardly in front of Chen Maoxiu’s car.

The three in the car could only watch, not even daring to honk the horn to urge the birds forward.

“Have you found it yet?” the old man asked while waiting for the ducks to finish crossing the road.

Staring at the phone, Shen Shubao yelled as he saw the ninth name, “Found him! Jiang Shen! It’s definitely him!”

Chen Maoxiu squeezed his head over. “Within the top 20?! He’s in the finals?!”

Shen Shubao nodded. He took in a deep breath, his hands shaking as he tapped on the finals page. “I checked just now. The results of the finals are listed in order, and they only reveal the top eight names. I don’t know what rank Jiang Shen got.”

“Why are you wasting time talking?” Goumao’s anxiety was at its peak. “Hurry up and see what place Shen-*zi* got!”

In the end, for some unknown reason, the page refused to load.

“Oh no…” mumbled Shen Shubao, “the page is frozen.”

The old man suddenly sat up. Pointing to the front, he said loudly, “The ducks are gone! The ducks are gone!”

Chen Maoxiu started his car again, stomping on the accelerator. “Sit tight! We’ll go back and connect through Wifi!”

As they had just celebrated the New Year yesterday, many families were staying at home, sleeping in. Shen Shubao and Goumao had gone into the city to meet their friends, so they had no choice but to wake up early. When she heard the car, Chen Qingling was still laying blearily in bed. Last September, she had just been accepted into Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, and she was celebrating her first New Year as a university student.

“My brother’s back?” Hugging her blanket, Chen Qingling asked Miao Hua’er when she entered her room.

Miao Hua’er was surprised. “Why are you awake?” She laughed. “He’s back. I don’t know what’s going on, but he was screaming and shouting as he ran over to the Jiang’s. Do you want to go over and see?”

Frowning, Chen Qingling thought about it for a moment, then struggled out of bed. “I’ll go have a look.”

“*Aiyoh*,” exclaimed Miao Hua’er, “Wear your socks. It’s freezing outside.”

Chen Qingling did not even change out of her pajamas, only pulling on a large, cotton-padded jacket and ran over next door, her hair still disheveled. Tony was currently strutting about in the yard, and it cooed when it saw her.

“Tony~” Qingling-*zi* blew him a kiss. “You’re really beautiful today.”

After praising the chicken, Chen Qingling entered the Jiang’s living room. Chen Maoxiu happened to be by the door. Seeing her as he looked up, he was shocked. “Why are you here?”

Chen Qingling glared at him. “What, I’m not allowed to come?”

Reflexively, Chen Maoxiu looked down at her slippers. “Are you wearing socks?”

Chen Qingling really could not stand this nagging brother of hers, and stuck her foot out for him to see. Chen Maoxiu squatted down in a hurry, tucking her foot back into the slipper. “I got it, I got it. Keep your feet warm, girls can’t get cold.”

As the two of them talked by the door, Shen Shubao suddenly started shouting from inside, “Jiang Shen! I found him! The finals! Jiang Shen!”

Chen Qingling felt as though a hurricane had dragged her into the house. The old bookstore owner was there as well, so excited he could barely speak. Tan Lingling had a dazed expression on her face, staring blankly at the webpage on the laptop.

Goumao and Qingling-*zi* squeezed behind Shen Shubao. Holding the mouse, Shen Shubao’s hand kept trembling, and it took him a few tries before he managed to scroll all the way back up to the top of the page.

They saw a gold dancing logo in front of the name ‘Shen Jiang’, and the name was at the top of the list of eight dancers.

Tan Lingling pointed at the computer, stammering, “W-what does that mean?”

Covering her mouth, tears spilled out of Chen Qingling’s eyes in an instant. Shen Shubao turned, so emotional that he could barely swallow. Taking a few deep

breaths, he was finally able to say calmly, “Auntie, Jiang Shen has won the gold medal. He won first place in the Prix de Lausanne; a Chinese dancer!”

Tan Lingling didn’t dare believe her ears. Her mouth opened and shut a few times, but before she could say a word, the phone in the living room rang suddenly.

“Answer it!” the old man urged her, “it might be Shen-*zi*!”

Tan Lingling glanced at the others before she ran, stumbling into the living room to pick up the phone. Shen Shubao, Chen Maoxiu and Qingling-*zi* all helped the old man along, following Tan Lingling over to the living room as well.

Very comically, all of them surrounded the one phone, staring at Tan Lingling as she answered the call.

It was not clear if the person on the other end was Jiang Shen, but as Tan Lingling listened, her eyes started to redden. Her tears just couldn’t seem to stop, but her smile was extremely bright. Turning to Shen Shubao and Chen Maoxiu, she said, “Go! Go buy some firecrackers! Tonight, all of you will come for dinner, and we’ll celebrate Shenshen winning the gold medal!”

Unable to stop herself anymore, Chen Qingling hugged her brother, wailing loudly. While crying, she wiped at her tears, and Tan Lingling shoved the phone receiver into her hands. Jiang Shen was on the other end, laughing as he shouted at her, “Qingling-*zi! Don’*t cry! You should be happy I won!”

Hearing his voice, Chen Qingling cried even harder.

Not knowing whether to laugh or cry, Shen Shubao could only take the phone from her, asking, “When are you coming back?”

Wanting to hear the conversation, Chen Maoxiu was so anxious, he was yelling, “Switch to loudspeaker! Use loudspeaker! Are you guys dumb?!”

Next to him, the old man switched to loudspeaker quickly, and they heard Jiang Shen say, “I’ll be back next month. Bai Jinyi will be coming back with me!”

“I have more amazing news,” Jiang Shen said, sounding even happier about this than his win. “Bai Jinyi has officially entered the professional boxing stage in the United States. He’s going to take the gold belt!”

★

Jiang Shen was like a bird announcing good news, flitting about, calling all his friends, relatives, and ballet buddies, sharing his win with them. When he called Song Xin, the fairy was crying just as badly, fiercely, and loudly as Qingling-*zi.* While sobbing, she wailed, “You’ve really lived up to my expectations… you didn’t embarrass me at all…”

Jiang Shen was speechless. He kept feeling that ever since Song Xin had started to spend more time with Lai Song, even the way she spoke was a lot more philistine now.

Having cried enough, the fairy spoke as she sobbed, “There’s something I keep forgetting to tell you.”

Jiang Shen laughed. “What is it? Are you getting married?”

Song Xin said disdainfully, “I’ve only just graduated from university. What the fuck do you mean marriage?”

“Then what is it?”

Song Xin said proudly, “I opened my own dance studio.”

After a second of shock, Jiang Shen exclaimed loudly, “Wow, really?!”

“Really.” Song Xin laughed out loud. “I’ve joined Mr. Shen’s Laiyi Dance Studio, and we’ve already selected a place over here in our city. Once the renovations are done this year, we’ll be able to open next year. In the future, I’ll be Song Xin, a ballet teacher.”

Listening to her, inexplicably, Jiang Shen’s eyes welled up with tears. After some time, he finally responded quietly, “Song Xin, have your dreams come true?”

Time was like the wings of a hawk, slicing through the colorful past. The scene froze on the image of a young girl tying a feathered skirt around the waist of a boy.

And so, time slipped by imperceptibly, and the image replaced itself again and again.

In the blink of an eye, the feathers of that hawk were now lush and beautiful. It flew out from within the dreams, heading towards the endless horizon freely.

“No matter now or before, Jiang Shen,” Song Xin choked, then continued gently and lightly, “I’ve never ever regretted the choices I made. I’m proud of myself.”

After Bai Jinyi booked their flight tickets for home, he saw Jiang Shen’s slightly swollen, red eyes as soon as he returned to their bedroom. He did not say much to comfort him, only heading into the bathroom and wetting a towel with cold water for Jiang Shen to hold against his eyes.

“I’ve given Lai Song some money,” Bai Jinyi said suddenly.

Jiang Shen’s eyes were still covered by the towel, so he could only express his confusion with his lips.

Bai Jinyi responded, “So he can start a boxing gym.”

Jiang Shen hummed glumly. “… Why are you guys all opening this and that.”

“The money was earned from the amateur matches I’ve fought over the years. In the future, I’ll earn even more from professional matches.”

“That money comes from your blood and sweat.” Jiang Shen sighed. “My heart aches, spending that money.”

Bai Jinyi chuckled. “Your money comes from your blood and sweat as well. Does your heart ache when you spend it?”

Jiang Shen thought about it, then answered earnestly, “Not when *you* spend it.”

Bai Jinyi didn’t say anything, warmth welling up within his heart. He reached out, patting Jiang Shen’s hand.

Jiang Shen shifted his head, and the towel fell right down. Earlier, he had been crying quite fiercely, so the creases of his eyelids were deeper than normal.

“Come home with me,” said Jiang Shen as he pulled on Bai Jinyi’s hand.

“Why?” Bai Jinyi asked deliberately.

Jiang Shen grinned, laughing. “Because you’re my parents’ godson.”

Jiang Shen said that he wanted to take his parents’ godson home, but upon arriving in China, it was the Bai family secretary who picked them up instead.

“Madam has been waiting for a long time.” The secretary was very respectful, and he treated Jiang Shen the same way as well. “She asked me to take you and your friend home.”

Clicking his tongue impatiently, Bai Jinyi asked, “Did my father not buy her any bags recently?”

“He did.”

“What about a house?”

“He did as well.”

Bai Jinyi continued asking, “Jewels and accessories?”

The secretary sighed. “This has nothing to do with all that. Madam just misses you.”

Standing next to them, Jiang Shen really had no clue what they were talking about. Confused, he was invited into the car. Driving out of Shanghai Honqiao Airport, they drove through the city and back to Bai Jinyi’s family home. Only after

entering the garage of the private, garden-styled house, did Jiang Shen finally regain a tiny sense of reality, and belatedly, he started feeling nervous.

“I-I didn’t bring a gift,” Jiang Shen whispered to Bai Jinyi, “Should I go buy something first?”

Bai Jinyi also felt a headache on the horizon. “Don’t bother, she won’t like it anyway.”

That wasn’t accurate either, as Bai Jinyi never really managed to understand what his mother liked and wanted, even at this age. They had times when the bond between them was very strained, but for Bai Jinyi to be able to reach where he stood today, his mother’s support played a vital role.

The secretary informed them that Madam Bai was in the backyard, feeding the fish in the pond, so Bai Jinyi led Jiang Shen straight over. Most of the properties owned by the Bais in this area were old, Chinese, garden villas, the sort with at least four gardens to start, all designed by professional landscapers. The rocks, pavilions, and lotus ponds were all styled in the concept of an ancient water town, and walking into the garden, one would feel as though they had traveled through time. The only unfortunate thing was Bai Jinyi’s mother—

— Qin Wanjun. A lifetime of aesthetics and taste was still unable to modify her very aristocratic dressing style. Right now, she was wearing an extremely western styled outfit, sticking out like a sore thumb as she lay on a chaise lounge by the pond.

“You’re here?” Qin Wanjun had maintained her looks too well; it was completely impossible to tell how old she was. Wearing a pair of sunglasses and a sunhat, she was scattering fish food into the pond elegantly.

Bai Jinyi said coldly, “Stop feeding blindly, the fish are going to die.”

Qin Wanjun froze, still holding onto some fish food, and pulled her hand back, embarrassed. Glancing at Bai Jinyi, she shouted, “Bai’er!”

A loud crowing came from the tall rocks, overflowing with energy. A chicken, so fat its feet were nearly invisible, rushed down. Because it was too fat, when it hit the ground, it landed chest first. Then, staggering, it climbed back up, flapping its wings and continuing on its way.

Jiang Shen even noticed a bib-like handkerchief tied around the chicken’s neck, the logo distinctly Chanel.

Qin Wanjun was truly filled with motherly affection. Pointing at Bai Jinyi, she said to the chicken, “Bai’er, quick, look, your elder brother who abused you when you were young is back~”

Bai Jinyi was speechless.

The chicken with the perfect figure that he had fed through precise measurements and timing when he was young was now so fat, it was basically a ball. The culprit, as expected, was the over-pampering from the generation above.

Qin Wanjun teased the chicken for a little while before looking towards Jiang Shen. As she was wearing a pair of sunglasses, it was hard to see what kind of gaze she was looking at him with. She asked mildly, “You’re Jiang Shen?”

Nodding, Jiang Shen greeted her, “Hello, auntie.”

Qin Wanjun smiled, waving him over, “Come and let me have a look.”

Holding onto Jiang Shen, Bai Jinyi did not let him go. He suppressed his impatience, asking, “What exactly do you want?”

Qin Wanjun raised an elegant brow, asking sarcastically, “What? You’re afraid that I’ll bring out two billion and ask him to leave you?”

Jiang Shen was at a loss for words.

Acting very much like an unreasonable, classless woman, she snorted contemptuously as she said viciously, “In your dreams! With two billion, I can even buy a property in Shanghai’s Lujiazui district!”

Bai Jinyi’s temper couldn’t be considered good to begin with, and having boxed for so many years, his countenance was now even more menacing. However, this was his mother. What could he do? He could only coax Qin Wanjun how he would a child, “All right, enough. Stop putting on airs. Come on, get up, we’re going inside. Normally, you wouldn’t even spend more than ten minutes out in the yard during the whole year, complaining that the sun is too strong and that it’ll age you. Now that you’ve been out in the sun for so long, you’ve already aged ten years.”

While getting up, Qin Wanjun held the chicken in her arms, speaking darkly, “Don’t think that just because you’re a boxer, I wouldn’t dare beat you.” Then, she directed a gentle, amiable smile towards Jiang Shen, “Little Swan, come walk with me so we can talk.”

Gritting his teeth, Bai Jinyi exhausted his last shred of diplomacy. “We’ll talk once we’re inside!”

Their dinner went by considerably peacefully. Qin Wanjun finally stopped playing around, and Bai Jinyi also forcefully released Bai’er back outside to eat its chicken feed properly.

They had tea after the meal, and Qin Wanjun found something for Bai Jinyi to do again, asking him to wash fruits.

“Auntie Zhu has gone home for the New Year, and she hasn’t returned yet.” With great conviction, she said, “She’s already getting on in years, what’s wrong with

her enjoying her time with her family?! Go, wash the fruits!"

Bai Jinyi could only suppress the urge to roll his eyes, and left to wash the fruits. Qin Wanjun waited for him to leave, then like a child, she patted the seat next to her. "Good Little Swan, come sit by mom."

Hearing her call herself his mother, Jiang Shen was so alarmed, he almost missed a breath. Extremely shy, his cheeks heated up. However, Qin Wanjun was completely unbothered and asked him naturally, "Is dance practice normally very tiring?"

Jiang Shen nodded honestly. He then paused and shook his head as well. "Once I got used to it, it was no longer tiring."

Qin Wanjun smiled. Her eyes were very similar to Bai Jinyi's. There were a few gentle wrinkles that came naturally with age at the corners of her eyes, and she was so beautiful, like a blooming flower.

"Even if you get used to it, it's still tiring," she said, her gaze as gentle and tender as water, "Kids like you two, so hardworking and putting in so much effort, are all very good children."

Rubbing his hands together, Jiang Shen truly felt very embarrassed. He looked up at Qin Wanjun, then felt that she really did look too similar to Bai Jinyi. The longer he looked, the shyer he felt, so he could only look back down again, timid and quiet.

Qin Wanjun looked at him, then said, "I just wanted to meet you today, I have no other intentions." Pausing, the beautiful Madam Bai could not help but tease him. "If I really gave you two billion and asked you to leave Bai Jinyi, would you accept?"

Jiang Shen actually seemed to be a little conflicted about it before he finally said, "If you really gave me two billion, I'll be able to buy a place in Lujiazui and provide for Bai Jinyi. How would you be able to separate us then?"

Qin Wanjun was speechless.

★

Other than chatting with Qin Wanjun, Jiang Shen also showed her a video of him competing in the Prix de Lausanne. Actually, despite how Qin Wanjun was an elegant, classy woman with a wealthy background, she rarely came in contact with such things. Deep inside, she was actually very materialistic, always focusing on cash, properties, jewelry, and branded goods. Her taste was very similar to that of the nouveau riche, yet when Bai Jinyi wanted to start boxing, as a mother, she also did not agree.

"We never want our future generations to experience the same suffering we went through as parents." Qin Wanjun bit into an apple that Bai Jinyi had handed to her. "When he told me he liked boxing when he was young, I couldn't understand. It's

filled with blood and sweat, and you even get beaten up. Learning something artistic and cultivating one's senses would have been better."

Sitting to the side, Bai Jinyi frowned as he said sarcastically, "I'm really sorry about that then."

Qin Wanjun snorted, "You've finally learnt to be sorry?"

Bai Jinyi did not respond. Jiang Shen thought Qin Wanjun was about to share a life lesson, but in the end, the beautiful Madam did not follow the script at all, only saying two simple words, "Too late!"

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Qin Wanjun was extremely pleased. "When you were young, I couldn't bear to beat you. Now there are plenty of people out there beating you for me."

After she finished watching Jiang Shen's performance, Qin Wanjun wanted to watch the recordings Su Fang usually took of Bai Jinyi's matches. She had only just talked about 'beating her son', but when she actually saw Bai Jinyi getting hit in the ring, Qin Wanjun gasped, her heart aching. She was only able to watch for a short while before she started sniffling, wiping her tears in secret.

Bai Jinyi finally closed the video, "Stop watching."

Qin Wanjun glared at him with reddened eyes, her voice stubborn as she said, "I'll continue after you leave."

Bai Jinyi could not help but laugh. "Once I go professional, you can come and watch me box live. You'll sit right next to Little Swan, closest to the ring."

This time, Qin Wanjun did not reject him. She only reached out, swinging her fist at her son's muscular arm.

As the housekeeper was not around, the room Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi were sleeping in had been tidied up by Qin Wanjun herself. Bai Jinyi went to shower first, and Qin Wanjun had also prepared a set of clothes for Jiang Shen, including underwear.

"From now on, this will be your home too." Qin Wanjun really did like Bai'er a lot, and brought the chicken along with her wherever she went. When she entered a room, the chicken would also follow. Now, it was squatting on the floor with its eyes half-closed, seemingly napping away.

Towards her, Jiang Shen still felt a little reserved. He felt that revealing their relationship had been too easy, and the anxiety in his heart had yet to ease.

Qin Wanjun was like a clear mirror, her tone self-mocking as she spoke, "In the past, I could not understand, so I did try to stop Bai Jinyi from boxing. After, I gave it some thought. He's already thought things through, so what was I still conflicted

about?”

Qin Wanjun tilted her head to the side. Looking at Jiang Shen, her eyes seemed to be filled with tiny stars. “He’s my son, but more than that, he’s himself. What he’s persevering for, what he likes, they’re all part of him, and I have no right to take them away, even if I’m his mother.” Finally, she held Jiang Shen’s hand, saying softly, “And it’s the same for you too.”

Climbing into bed, Bai Jinyi saw Jiang Shen buried under the blanket entirely, only a small tuft of hair peeking out by the pillow.

He pulled the blanket back a little.

Jiang Shen had yet to fall asleep, his eyes bright as he looked up at Bai Jinyi.

“Are you cold?” Bai Jinyi asked him.

Jiang Shen shook his head. He climbed out from within the blanket cocoon, the fabric rustling, and pressed a firm kiss onto Bai Jinyi’s lips.

Raising a brow, Bai Jinyi asked, holding him, “What did my mother say to you?”

Jiang Shen wrapped his arms around Bai Jinyi’s neck, mumbling, “Nothing much…”

Obviously, Bai Jinyi did not believe him, but he also didn’t force Jiang Shen. It didn’t seem like it was anything bad.

“We’ll be going back to the village tomorrow,” said Bai Jinyi out of the blue.

“We’re not going to stay here for a few more days?”

“No.” It was unclear if Bai Jinyi was joking, but his expression was very stern as he said, “Spring is starting. We need to start transplanting seedlings into the ground.”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

In the current, automated times, it had been ages since transplanting seedlings had been done by hand. However, to let Richie Rich Bai experience it for himself, Chen Maoxiu’s family had actually set aside a small piece of land for them to play with.

After Shen Shubao graduated from university, he started working in the General Motors factory over in the city’s industrial park, doing research on gearboxes and engines. As he had to spend most of his time at work with a lathe, he usually went to work in a pair of overalls. When he came home, he would squat down by the fields, watching them sow rice plants.

Jiang Shen didn’t go into the rice paddy fields either. Instead, he instructed Bai Jinyi to do this and that.

Chen Maoxiu had to finish up helping with his family's farm stay business before he had any free time. After the New Year, Qingling-*zi* only stayed for a few days before she had to return to school for the new semester. Every time she missed home, she would look at photos Goumao had taken of them playing around. Right now, Bai Jinyi was sowing the field while Chen Maoxiu took photos of him on the side.

"It's not quite right for us to do this, right?" Despite saying so, Shen Shubao did not have the slightest intentions of moving. "Richie Rich Bai is working all alone, and we're just watching him?"

Goumao said, "You guys are the ones slacking off. I'm very busy as well."

Shen Shubao scolded him, "Busy, my ass!"

Bai Jinyi walked out of the mud slowly. His spoiled, pampered behaviour had diminished a lot over the years. Although he still couldn't help but purse his lips in disdain when he saw the mud on his shoes, at least he did not complain aloud. Jiang Shen brought a hose over from nearby, rinsing his shoes clean.

"Come, wash your hands," said Jiang Shen.

So Bai Jinyi bent over, and Jiang Shen lifted the hose higher. When Bai Jinyi looked up, he stole a kiss.

Wordless, Jiang Shen shot a quick glance over at Goumao and Shubao, who were standing not too far away.

Bai Jinyi chuckled softly. "They didn't notice anything; we were blocked by the hose."

Jiang Shen's face was a little red. Covering the opening of the hose with his thumb, he sprayed Bai Jinyi.

Bai Jinyi did not dodge, and wiped all the water onto Jiang Shen's collar. Sweeping up his soaking, wet fringe, he pulled Jiang Shen up from the ground. "Let's go."

Bai Jinyi had managed to sow more than half the plot of land with seedlings, the ground now a lush patch of green. Pulling Jiang Shen with him, Bai Jinyi slowly made his way over from one end of the field. Cupping his hands around his mouth, Shen Shubao shouted at them, "Enough! Stop looking! No matter how much you look, it still won't be ripe by tomorrow!"

Jiang Shen replied, "Let's plant strawberries tomorrow!"

Goumao yelled, "What strawberries?! We're going to the dairy farm tomorrow! We'll milk some cows!"

Ever since Jiang Shen started dancing at Shen Junyi's studio, it really had been such a long time since he had enjoyed such a carefree holiday. However, playtime was playtime, and his regular stretching and training sessions in the mornings and evenings had already become a habit to him. Instead, it was Bai Jinyi who was starting to sleep in again in the mornings, his bad temper getting worse whenever he woke up.

He slept until noon, and after lunch, the Bai family chauffeur even brought Bai'er over to them. The chicken, who had always been living in the lap of luxury, was truly terrified when it arrived at the village for the first time. It shrieked the whole way, and by the time it entered the yard, it was turning hoarse.

When Tony and Bai'er saw each other, despite being father and child, they didn't seem to experience any sort of touching family reunion. Plus, Tony was a chicken born and raised in the village. It was sturdy and muscular, its personality fierce and savage. With its colorful tail raised up towards the sky, it stared icily at the little, round, fat Bai'er. Today, the handkerchief tied around Bai'er's neck was Louis Vuitton, and it hid by the door of the coop, shivering in fear.

"Come here, Bai'er," Jiang Shen coaxed, crouching beside the door, "don't be afraid."

Bai'er actually had a rather pleasant personality, it was just a little too noisy. No one knew how it developed the habit of running and cawing at the same time. When it rushed over, it was just like a large version of the rubber, shrieking chicken.

Before Jiang Shen could catch it, Tony suddenly rushed out, blocking the path. With a fluff of its tail, it whipped it across Jiang Shen's face.

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Nearly peeing itself in fright, Bai'er stumbled and fell chest first once again. Tony prowled towards it, pecking at its Louis Vuitton handkerchief, and Bai'er cried out as though it was getting slaughtered.

"That belongs to Bai'er." Jiang Shen tried to pull at Tony's tail. "Hey, you can't snatch other people's belongings!"

Bai Jinyi was probably extremely annoyed with all the noise. With an irritated expression, he stood by the wall holding his bowl, and said coldly, "Give it to Tony. It can't even protect its own belongings, how useless."

Using all of the flesh on its extraordinarily large body, Bai'er just barely managed to save its own handkerchief from being snatched away by Tony. The clean, fat, rich, aristocratic aura from a second ago was completely gone. Its comb was dirty, and it had even lost a few feathers from its wings.

Jiang Shen could not bear watching any longer. He went into the house, grabbing an embroidered handkerchief that Tan Lingling never used, and returned, tying it around Tony's neck.

“Enough, you have one now too.” Jiang Shen knotted it securely. “Don’t snatch Bai’er’s anymore.”

Tony glanced down at its neck, pecking at the handkerchief a couple of times. It seemed quite satisfied, puffing up its chest and cooing a couple of times at Bai’er, before it spread its wings and flew up to the wall to enjoy the sun.

Bai’er seemed to have lost its soul. It looked at its own Louis Vuitton handkerchief, then towards the embroidered handkerchief around Tony’s neck. Finally, quivering, it stood back up again.

Jiang Shen wiped its feathers and comb clean, then pushed it into the coop. “Go sleep.”

Bai’er took a few steps, only to retreat back again. Stretching its neck out, it looked somewhat enviously at Tony sitting on the wall.

Bai Jinyi stopped eating and started mocking his chicken extremely childishly, “You won’t be able to fly up there, you stupid, fat chicken.”

Jiang Shen held his laughter back, and did not say anything about how Bai Jinyi had nothing better to do than bully his chicken. Going inside, he turned the computer on, searching for news about the ballet competition going on in Vienna.

Once Bai Jinyi had enough fun, his temper from waking up was mostly gone. He followed Jiang Shen into his room, only to see the dancer looking at his computer grimly.

“What’s wrong?” Bai Jinyi rested his chin on Jiang Shen’s head.

Sighing, Jiang Shen hesitated for a moment, before saying uncertainly, “*Shixiong* seems to have lost.”

★

Amongst the once three prides of Laiyi, Shen Junyi had been seated upon the throne for the past decade, never stepping down even once. Within the country, Liang-*lao* had led the way. When his brilliance had reached an end, Shen Junyi picked up the banner, revitalizing the sluggish enthusiasm the country had for ballet. From that moment on, he became the universally recognized ‘Number One Dancer’.

After him were Ai Lai and Zhou Luoxiang, who were even younger. Although all three were students under the same teacher, Shen Junyi was still an insurmountable peak. He blazed brightly and radiantly, and the pressure he exerted on others made them unable to breathe.

Zhou Luoxiang was recognized as the most mediocre out of the three. He did not have Shen Junyi’s exquisite technique, nor could he compare to Ai Lai’s choreography talent or ability to experience emotions in his dance. He was average

in all matters, but now, unexpectedly, he became the second grand slam dancer, winning gold at all top level international competitions after Shen Junyi.

Shen Junyi was a judge at Vienna. During the competition, he had given his vote to Zhou Luoxiang as well.

After so many years, the title of 'Number One Dancer' finally belonged to someone else.

Of course, Liu Xingzhi's second place performance had also been marvellous. He stood together with Zhou Luoxiang, accepting interviews from the media. The two stood shoulder to shoulder, looking like they were on friendly terms. Zhou Luoxiang was graceful and restrained, beautiful like a peach blossom in full bloom. With an arm around Liu Xingzhi's shoulders, his attitude was like a senior taking care of his junior.

"Every generation, new talents emerge. The younger generation is working so hard. As part of the older generation, of course I cannot fall behind." Zhou Luoxiang laughed as he spoke, then looked towards Liu Xingzhi, patting his shoulder meaningfully. "Continue working hard, Xingzhi, I'm waiting for you."

With how proud Liu Xingzhi was, he barely managed to keep the smile on his face. Gritting his teeth, he said humbly, "I still have many areas to learn from you, Sir."

Zhou Luoxiang seemed very sincere as well. "We're all from the same school, why so courteous?"

After the interviews, Shen Junyi went to the lounge to take a look, but did not find Liu Xingzhi. Instead, he bumped into Zhou Luoxiang in the corridor. Although he disliked the other person greatly, showing it in public would easily result in a scandal. Besides, Zhou Luoxiang had always been friendly and respectful towards him, never a toe out of line.

"*Shixiong*!" Zhou Luoxiang had spotted Shen Junyi from afar, so he took the initiative to greet him, and ran over hurriedly. "*Shixiong*, are you looking for Xingzhi?"

Shen Junyi stiffened for a beat, but he still responded in the end, "Mn. He's probably gone to meet his fans, he's not in the lounge."

Looking at him, Zhou Luoxiang smiled. "*Shixiong* is finally willing to speak to me."

Shen Junyi frowned. He averted his eyes and said indifferently, "Ai Lai doesn't blame you, so I don't have the right to either."

Zhou Luoxiang's eyes crinkled in a smile as he nodded. "As long as *Shixiong* no longer blames me."

Another reporter appeared in the corridor. Upon seeing the two of them together, he naturally wanted to approach and take a photo. Zhou Luoxiang originally wanted to refuse, but to his surprise, Shen Junyi actually posed for a photo.

"Principal Zhou, please stand a little closer." The reporter smiled. "It's a rare occurrence for both 'Number One Dancers' to appear within the same frame."

Liu Xingzhi only spent a short time meeting his fans. Having lost the competition, his mood wasn't great, so he didn't want to deal with too much. Not even Mr. Pu saw a smile from Liu Xingzhi.

It was not easy to comfort someone, but he couldn't just say nothing at all. He could only utter a few platitudes like 'failure is the mother of success'.

Liu Xingzhi waved him away, and it was unclear if he was just speaking out of anger, or if he was sincere, "Losing means losing. I didn't perform as well. Zhou Luoxiang truly did dance very well."

Shen Junyi's position in the ballet circle was too high, and Ai Lai was bogged down by his injury. Many of the big-name insiders had once shared the same worry — that the glorious age of ballet in the country would once again descend into sluggishness, turning into shambles, and be forever withered after Shen Junyi became older, and was past his peak.

Very early on, Liu Xingzhi had already been aware of this. With his innate talent, ever since he was young, his aim had always been to inherit Shen Junyi's legacy, bringing ballet in China to even greater heights, and be written down in the pages of history.

But today, there was no doubt that Zhou Luoxiang had given him a slap to the face.

That person looked graceful, restrained, and weak, inconspicuous and unexceptional. His reputation had always been mixed, and he was never liked by the media. Many say that he only sought instant success and benefits, and had no good intentions.

That year, during the conflict between the three prides of Laiyi, Zhou Luoxiang was the 'ungrateful' one, the one that bit the hand that fed him. After Ai Lai, who was much better received by the ballet circle, stopped dancing, many people had condemned Zhou Luoxiang openly.

Zhou Luoxiang did not argue or explain. Instead, he went to Beijing and started a school of his own. During all these years, he challenged Shen Junyi directly, over and over again. Although he lost more than he won, his indomitable spirit, along with his reckless, resolute personality, silenced many arguments.

This time, after the competition in Vienna, the media even praised Zhou Luoxiang in a seemingly derogatory manner, saying 'Empress Zhou' had a bad

temperament. Now that he was on the throne, he was bound to be seated there for at least a century, and there was no way anyone could pull him down.

Once, Zhou Luoxiang even responded to this, sounding amused yet serious, “It’s not that I’m hogging the seat, refusing to leave. It’s just that I feel I can still dance. The heyday of ballet can’t end with me. The younger ones can also have a target, doing their best to jump up and replace me.”

He looked at the interviewer, smiling ever so charmingly. “I have to wait here for them to come.”

Liu Xingzhi just knew how the media would spin that. Of course, his loss this time was not embarrassing in the slightest either. His performance had been excellent, but it was also true that he was unsatisfied with this defeat. He was so upset that when Jiang Shen called, the phone rang for a long time before he finally answered.

“Where are you?” Jiang Shen asked.

Sitting on top of his luggage, Liu Xingzhi’s tone was quite impatient. “Take a guess.”

Jiang Shen complained, “*Shixiong*, stop joking. *Shifu* and Mr. Zhou have both returned already, but you haven’t. Don’t you need to dance?”

As though he had been holding his breath back, Liu Xingzhi said suddenly, “I’m not dancing anymore.”

Jiang Shen was shocked.

Over the phone, the whistling of a train could be heard in the distance. On Liu Xingzhi’s end, the sounds of a crowd were audible, noisy and loud.

“I’m heading back to the grasslands.” Liu Xingzhi’s voice traveled into Jiang Shen’s ear clearly. “To ride horses, herd sheep, and cut grass.”

He ended with a laugh. “Goodbye, Jiang Shen.”

Shen Junyi was in his office arranging the competition schedule for the next year. When Jiang Shen ran in, he was not surprised at all. Looking up, he asked rather expressionlessly, “What’s wrong?”

Jiang Shen was so anxious, he nearly became incoherent. “*Sh-shixiong*, he said, um, he said that he wasn’t going, going to dance anymore?!”

Shen Junyi’s expression went cold. “That’s what he said to you?”

Jiang Shen nodded furiously.

Shen Junyi looked back down again. “I’ve approved his request for a year’s break, for him to rest and recover.”

Jiang Shen's eyes widened. "A-a year?!"

"There's no point in being jealous. During that time, you'll have to take his place in competitions overseas."

Jiang Shen was speechless.

When Jing Luoyun tried to call Liu Xingzhi again, it just wouldn't go through. Waiting next to her, Jiang Shen broke out in an anxious sweat, and could not help but ask, "He's not answering?"

Jing Luoyun sighed. "Before, when he injured his ankle, he also returned home to rest for half a year. We couldn't contact him then either."

Jiang Shen looked as though he was about to collapse.

"It's impossible that Liu Xingzhi won't dance anymore." Jing Luoyun consoled him. "Your *shixiong* is only bullying you for fun, don't mind it too much."

Jiang Shen glanced at Jing Luoyun, a trace of true anger in his voice, "*Shixiong* is too annoying."

Jing Luoyun couldn't help but laugh, and patted Jiang Shen on the head.

Shen Junyi was not joking when he said he wanted Jiang Shen to go overseas to compete. By the end of the year, Jiang Shen would be eighteen. Other than Helsinki, he would be eligible to participate in almost all the top international ballet competitions in the adult category. The result was that his schedule for the entire year was fully packed, without a moment of break.

Bai Jinyi could only remain obediently in the States. One flew all over the world, while the other focused on fighting in the professional ring. Every month, they managed to squeeze in a few days to see each other.

Fortunately, the following June was the USA International Ballet Competition held in Jackson. Jiang Shen finally had at least twenty days to spend with Bai Jinyi.

Coming back from boxing, Bai Jinyi saw Jiang Shen on the phone, standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows. His phone was pressed to his ear for a very long time, but no one seemed to answer. Jiang Shen could only hang up, his entire body deflating. Turning around, he saw Bai Jinyi, and a smile spread on his face, "You're back?"

"Liu Xingzhi still won't answer?"

Jiang Shen sighed. "Mn."

Bai Jinyi did not speak. He drew closer to Jiang Shen, hugging him from behind, and placed him on his lap.

“You should be thinking about your competition,” Bai Jinyi said placidly, “You shouldn’t be distracted by others.”

Jiang Shen looked down at him and could not help but laugh. “I’m not distracted… Besides, there’s you.”

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. “I’m distracting you?”

Jiang Shen reached out, wrapping his arms around Bai Jinyi’s neck, kissing him on the lips as he mumbled, “No, you make me completely focused.”

★

During the year or so that Liu Xingzhi was on leave, Jiang Shen had become the new darling of the ballet world and media. Jing Luoyun was now like Zhou Luoxiang, a pillar of strength in China’s ballet circle. As for the bright, new star, who had been termed a ‘genius’, Jiang Shen could be considered a worthy successor.

In the two years after the Prix de Lausanne, Jiang Shen’s fame and renown grew exponentially. With his viral performance in *Silvergrass* as his foundation, Jiang Shen and Liu Xingzhi attracted a lot of attention from outside the ballet circle. The caretakers in the ‘Little Swan Ecological Protection Organization’ super topic either created content for the fandom, or praised Jiang Shen to the skies. Every time Jiang Shen participated in a competition, it was as joyous as a national celebration.

“Is anyone going to Jackson to watch the competition in person? I heard that, this year, other than the Russians, many of the Japanese and Korean dancers are also very impressive!” — An ‘Older Sister Caretaker’ fan

#The Little Swan Ecological Protection Organization [Super Topic]# #Beautiful swan, fighting! #What’s there to be afraid of?! My little swan is the best! Just go ahead and dance! Everything will be be fine!” — A brainless ‘Motherly Caretaker’ fan

“I heard that Caretaker *Yeye* attended the competition. *Yeye* is really one of the top fans here. All the personal photos have been taken by *Yeye*, and they all look so good.”

“… Poster above, I want to ask: are the users ‘Little Swan’s Husband’ and ‘Little Swan’s Grandfather’ in this super topic actual people, or fake ones? They really exist amongst the top fans?”

It was actually rare for Bai Jinyi to check into Jiang Shen’s super topic. This year, after the competition in Jackson, he took a photo of Jiang Shen receiving the prize and posted it there. To be fair, the photo wasn’t as good as those taken by official media, and from the angle and colors, it was apparent that the photo had been taken at a close distance by a fan. However, the photo was incredibly ‘intimate’. As soon as it was posted, all the ‘Caretakers’ screamed like swans as they swarmed forth

over it.

Clearly, 'Little Swan's Husband' had become the most mysterious fan in the Little Swan Ecological Protection Center.

Whenever Jiang Shen took photos with dancers of other nationalities, reporters, both Chinese and otherwise, would all hurry forward to interview him. Compared to two years ago, when he knew nothing, Jiang Shen was a lot more adept at handling interviews now.

Of course, the unavoidable questions were always about Liu Xingzhi. The reporters always liked to ask him whether or not he knew where Liu Xingzhi was currently, what he was doing, and how he felt comparing his accomplishments to Liu Xingzhi's.

"Actually, I'm not sure where *Shixiong* is right now either." Jiang Shen contemplated for a moment, before finally saying, "But I will go find him."

No one took him seriously when he said that. After all, who wouldn't be happy to have one less competitor on stage? Perhaps if Liu Xingzhi continued letting himself go like this, he would become the second Ai Lai, and would never achieve anything greater in ballet.

Bai Jinyi saved some of the interviews, and when he saw any malicious speculation, he would deal with it immediately, preventing Jiang Shen from seeing it. After packing his luggage, he saw Jiang Shen on the phone again when he returned to the room.

"All right, I know, I'll be safe." Jiang Shen had a pen and paper in hand, having jotted something down. When he saw Bai Jinyi, he smiled, and spoke a little while more on the phone before hanging up.

Bai Jinyi walked over. "You managed to get it?"

Jiang Shen waved the post-it a little proudly. "I got it. Shall we book the plane tickets?"

"Sure. What if we still can't find him after we get there?"

"That shouldn't happen." Jiang Shen was rather confident. "*Shixiong* has a place in the city, and he only goes back to stay in the grasslands during the summer. We'll go straight to the grasslands to look for him. I also found out which area *Shixiong*'s family stays in. We'll definitely be able to find him."

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. He did not speak, and just booked their tickets.

The flight from Beijing to Hohhot was less than an hour and a half. The majority of the journey was from Hohhot to the grasslands. The Xilamuren Grassland was over ninety kilometers away from Hohhot. Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi rented a car, but it still took over two hours. Once they arrived at the actual grasslands, Jiang Shen felt that those two hours were not a big deal after all.

The fields in the summer were lush and green, the lakes wide and vast. Jiang Shen stuck his head out of the car window, gazing towards the horizon in the distance as the sun-scented wind caressed his face. Bai Jinyi had one hand on the car door, and following Jiang Shen's example, he stretched half his body out of the window, his other arm around Jiang Shen's shoulders.

Jiang Shen looked up at him. Under the blue sky peppered with clouds, Bai Jinyi leaned down, kissing him intimately.

Nowadays, Xilamuren Grassland had a very well-developed tourism area, and the address Jiang Shen had managed to obtain was not very far from said area. Apparently, Liu Xingzhi's family also dabbled in the tourism business, and their annual profits were very good.

Summer was the peak tourist season of Inner Mongolia. On the way, other than their car, there were also quite a number of off-road enthusiasts. Approaching their destination, Jiang Shen tried calling his senior's number once more.

"The reception here is very bad," the driver laughed as he reminded him, "Once we reach the resort area, there'll be a signal tower there, and you can try calling again."

Jiang Shen asked curiously, "Can we stay in a yurt?"

The driver replied, "Once you enter the grasslands, there are only yurts available. You can even ride horses and pet little lambs."

Hearing that they could ride horses, Bai Jinyi looked down, asking Jiang Shen, "Do you know how to ride a horse?"

Jiang Shen replied with a question. "Do you?"

"Of course."

Jiang Shen laughed. "Then you can teach me."

The car drove further into the grassland. About four or five kilometers away from the resort area, they could already see quite a number of yurts with their white roofs. A couple of steeds roamed about leisurely, with no one watching them.

Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi got out of the car, one after another. As their phones were unable to receive any signal, they could only ask the nearby herdsmen directly.

When they mentioned the name 'Liu Xingzhi', from their reactions, a few of the herdsmen clearly knew him.

"Are you looking for Aodun Muqi'er?" A herdsman smiled as he asked them.

For a moment, Jiang Shen didn't understand who he was referring to. Then, he saw the man pointing towards the southeast. "He likes to take the horses there to roam. There's a very large lake there, and the scenery is beautiful."

The herdsmen even brought them some horses. “You guys can ride these horses to go look for him.”

Jiang Shen did not know how to ride, so he wanted to refuse the offer on reflex. However, Bai Jinyi accepted the reins, and swung himself onto the horse easily. Testing out his control, he led the horse on a small jog around the place, finally stopping in front of Jiang Shen.

“Come up.” Bai Jinyi held his hand out. “Come sit in front of me.”

With the help of the herdsmen, Jiang Shen climbed up into Bai Jinyi’s arms.

“Wow,” he exclaimed softly, “it’s so high up.”

Holding him tight, Bai Jinyi squeezed lightly with his feet, urging the horse into a light trot.

It was no trouble at all for the fully grown steed to bear the weight of two people. Bai Jinyi guided the horse in the direction the herdsmen had pointed out, and just as they had said, a small lake appeared not too far away. There were a few young people gathered there, and the most conspicuous one there was naturally Liu Xingzhi with his head full of dreadlocks.

Cupping his hands around his mouth, Jiang Shen shouted, “*Shixiong*!”

Liu Xingzhi did not look over. Instead, someone next to him nudged him, pointing behind.

Jiang Shen shouted again, “*Shixiong*!”

Liu Xingzhi finally looked back.

Bai Jinyi’s horse had reached the lake, galloping. Looking startled, Liu Xingzhi stood up. When he saw Jiang Shen atop the horse, he was in complete disbelief, until the younger dancer clambered down and ran over to him.

“*Shixiong*!” Jiang Shen’s face was a little red from the wind. “I came to find you!”

Liu Xingzhi looked at him, then at Bai Jinyi, who was behind him. His mouth opened and closed a few times soundlessly, before he could finally ask, “How did you guys manage to find your way here?”

Actually, it wasn’t easy to find Liu Xingzhi. Other than asking Shen Junyi for his phone number and address, Jiang Shen even contacted Liu Xingzhi’s family directly. Fortunately, life in the grasslands was now completely different than what it was in the past. Even when they lived on the grasslands itself, all the basic necessities and amenities were still available.

Liu Xingzhi probably felt a sense of helplessness, as though he had his hideout discovered. As he brought Bai Jinyi and Jiang Shen back to the yurts, he happened to see his own eldest brother walking out.

“Hey.” Aodun Wendusu was not surprised to see the guests. “I was wondering if I should go pick you guys up.”

Liu Xingzhi looked at his brother, disgruntled. “Why did you tell them everything?”

“You’ve been here for over a year already. Even the horses are tired of seeing you.”

Liu Xingzhi was speechless.

This was the first time Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi were staying in a yurt. Liu Xingzhi brought them slippers and toiletries, explaining, “Showering is not very convenient here. How long are you guys planning to stay?”

Bai Jinyi pointed at Jiang Shen. “If you don’t go back, he’ll probably never leave.”

Liu Xingzhi sighed, feeling a headache coming on. “It’s not like I’ll never return.”

Jiang Shen said, “Then just come back with me!”

After a moment of hesitation, Liu Xingzhi said, “I’ve seen the news. Congratulations on winning in Jackson. It’s your first A level award, you should celebrate it properly.”

Jiang Shen pressed his lips together. “If *Shixiong* comes back with me, that will be my celebration.”

Liu Xingzhi was about to break down with these repeated requests for him to go back. Finally, he managed to say, “Alright, alright. Since you’re here already, enjoy yourself for the next few days.”

When Liu Xingzhi told them to enjoy themselves for the next few days, it really was only a few days. His family’s land took up over 600 acres, mainly managing herds of horses. In Liu Xingzhi’s words, they were very poor when he was a child. Things only started to look up after the new government policy came out. Their land became valuable, and the tourism industry started to develop.

“The first time I went to ballet class, I could not even bear to spend money on ballet shoes.” Liu Xingzhi carried a little lamb out from next door, letting Jiang Shen play with it. “My parents found me on the grasslands, and my brother treats me as though we’re related by blood. There is no way I can repay their kindness.”

The wool of the lamb was soft and warm, and Jiang Shen stroked it for a while, before finally saying, “When I first started dancing, my family situation wasn’t great either. Now that I think about it, it really is too wonderful that I was able to continue.”

Liu Xingzhi looked at him, suddenly smiling. “My Mongolian name is Aodun Muqi’er. Do you know what that means?”

Jiang Shen held the little lamb in his arms, shaking his head cluelessly.

"It means the branch to the stars." Liu Xingzhi sat down cross-legged on the grass, looking up at the sky. Stretching his hand out abruptly, he pointed at the vast, endless horizon. "A tree is only able to touch the stars in the sky when it has grown proudly, towering over everything else. I have always strived towards that."

Jiang Shen's eyes looked in the direction that Liu Xingzhi was pointing at, towards the horizon. The sun was currently setting slowly, rays of golden light stretching out and dyeing half the sky scarlet.

Riding a horse, Bai Jinyi sprinted through the hues of red and gold. He pulled the reins taut, and the front hooves of the horse reared upwards, creating a dark silhouette within the ringing of neighing.

Jiang Shen only returned to himself when the horse drew closer.

Bai Jinyi's body was engulfed in the fragrance of sunshine and grass. Along with the little lamb Jiang Shen was hugging, he pulled them both into his arms.

Sitting next to them, Liu Xingzhi's expression was ugly. "Enough, you guys. This is my territory."

Bai Jinyi smirked. "You can go back and look for Pu Lian. He's been wanting to come here, but he's afraid of making you unhappy."

Liu Xingzhi clicked his tongue, dusting his pants off as he stood up. "Let's go back for dinner. There's an event after, you guys will like it."

Since Liu Xingzhi had said that they would like it, it was definitely something worth anticipating. Halfway through their meal, Aodun Wendusu started a bonfire in front of the yurts. Other than Jiang Shen and Bai Jinyi, they also had another group of young tourists. Everyone gathered around the bonfire, sitting down on the ground.

Aodun Wendusu took out a horsehead fiddle. He shouted, "Xingzhi, come dance!"

Liu Xingzhi stepped forth leisurely, removing his shirt as he walked. Left in a low-cut robe with wide sleeves, his tanned, muscular upper chest was revealed. Smiling, he asked, "What should I dance?"

Aodun Wendusu did not reply. He started to play his fiddle and throat sing.

At some point, the moon was already hanging on the edge of the sky. The countless stars twinkled and blinked radiantly, the hazy Milky Way spread across the entire night sky. In front of the bonfire, Liu Xingzhi was performing an Andai dance. His feet were bare, leaping and twisting. He kicked in midair, and the wide sleeves of his robe swirled as he waved his arms.

Stamping his feet, Liu Xingzhi danced over to Jiang Shen, pulling him up. Bai Jinyi could only follow, the three dancing together around the bonfire.

Bai Jinyi did not have much talent for dancing, and could only imitate whatever they were doing. However, Jiang Shen picked the dance up very quickly, even adding a few ballet moves. This brought out Liu Xingzhi's competitiveness, and he challenged Jiang Shen, starting a dance battle.

Aodun Wendusu gave it his all, accompanying the two with his fiddle. Many could not help taking their phones out to record the scene, cheering the dancers on loudly.

Liu Xingzhi and Jiang Shen only collapsed to the ground in exhaustion when the bonfire was finally dying out. Laying there, they did not want to move even a finger.

The tourists dispersed, satisfied, and Aodun Wendusu put his fiddle away. He pulled his younger brother up from the grass and said, "You should be packing your luggage. Get ready to leave tomorrow."

Liu Xingzhi shot him a look and sat up, not speaking.

Aodun Wendusu tugged at his brother's braid. "You're our proud, little wolf cub, our falcon flying free." He nodded at Jiang Shen, smiling broadly. "Thank you, Little Swan, for coming here to pick up my brother."

In the end, Liu Xingzhi left with Aodun Wendusu. Bai Jinyi sat there with Jiang Shen for a little while, and he too could not resist lying down next to the dancer on the grass.

Gazing up at the night sky, Jiang Shen suddenly said, "I've invited *Shixiong* to dance as my supporting lead."

"What supporting lead?"

"For my 'first dance'."

Bai Jinyi turned to look at him. Due to the various competitions he had participated in, Jiang Shen's 'first dance' that was originally supposed to be on his eighteenth birthday had to be postponed to the next year. This performance was deeply significant to Jiang Shen, representing the first answer he was presenting to dance and his youth as an adult.

Jiang Shen did say much else about his 'first dance'. Instead, he suddenly raised his hand, pointing at the sky. "Look, there are so many stars."

Bai Jinyi looked up. As he was doing so, Jiang Shen's face appeared abruptly in his view.

"Your star, where is it?" Resting his head in his palm, Jiang Shen looked down, straight into Bai Jinyi's eyes.

Bai Jinyi did not respond, and cupped Jiang Shen's head. On the grass, under the moonlight, their lips could not bear to part.

With his forehead pressed against Jiang Shen's, Bai Jinyi panted softly, asking quietly, "What about your star?"

Jiang Shen smiled, placing his palm against Bai Jinyi's chest.

"My star? He's right here."

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END

## Extra 1 — Some Ordinary Dreams

When Jiang Shen was twenty-five, he finally won the gold awarded by the French Modern Ballet Union. This was the first time he had won the grand slam by receiving the top prizes in all the prestigious international ballet competitions. The last one who had received this honor was the current ‘Number One Dancer’, Liu Xingzhi.

The entire country might not be celebrating this news, but firecrackers were being lit all over back in Jiang Shen’s village. Shen Shubao hurried back home overnight from his business trip, and on the way, he bumped into Chen Maoxiu, who looked just as travel-weary as he did.

“You’ve finished helping Qingling-*zi* with her exhibition already?” Shen Shubao asked Goumao reflexively when he saw him.

Chen Maoxiu was even more anxious than him. “Yes, it’s done. She had arranged to meet with her friends in Beijing and spend a couple of days there, but once she heard this news, she cancelled it. She’ll be back tomorrow.”

Shen Shubao laughed. “It’s good news, but we still don’t know if Shen-*zi* will be able to come home so quickly.”

“He’s still together with Bai Jinyi?”

“He did accompany him to the competition,” replied Shen Shubao.

Chen Maoxiu sighed. “Richie Rich Bai is very impressive too. He’s the first middleweight Chinese boxer in the States, and I heard that during his match last month, he KO-ed Limann in the eighth round?”

Shen Shubao nodded. “Yes, that was the previous middleweight champion of WBC, and Bai Jinyi has won the gold belt for the first time. The media has reported that he’ll be fighting in the WBO next year.”

Chen Maoxiu sighed again. For some reason, he suddenly laughed. “They’re really amazing.”

Shen Shubao did not speak, only reaching out and patting Chen Maoxiu on the shoulder. He asked, “How’s the farm stay business recently?”

“It’s the off-season right now, and there’s only one group coming tomorrow… Let’s not talk about me. What about you? Did you learn anything at the product conference?”

Shen Shubao sighed. “What’s there to learn? All we can do is continue researching and developing our gearboxes. The foreigners’ precision parts are not something that can be understood in a day; all I can do is strive to get some results before I finally go bald.”

Chen Maoxiu glanced at his hair, saying sympathetically, “It’s fine even if you’re bald. Our village’s Shen Shubao is very handsome.”

The group that came to the farm stay the next day were people from a research institute. After some small talk, Chen Maoxiu discovered that they were all brilliant students. The one with the lowest education qualification among them was a PhD student, and many of them were all professors and post-doc fellows.

Chen Maoxiu felt an inexplicable pressure coming upon him. There were a few women leading the group, and one of them looked very capable. Her last name was Yang.

"Sorry to trouble you by asking." Yang Shaohui spoke very politely, but her expression was rather stern. "My main objective for coming here is to do some experiments regarding the water quality. Lake Tai is nearby, is it possible to arrange for transportation there?"

Chen Maoxiu replied, "Transportation isn't an issue, I can drive you there. What time would you like to leave?"

Yang Shaohui probably hadn't expected that the boss of the farm stay would perform such a service himself, and she glanced over at him. Still, she said, "I plan to leave at 6am."

Nodding, Chen Maoxiu smiled. "No problem. Tomorrow morning, right? I'll pick you up on the dot."

Yang Shaohui thanked him. She didn't say anything else, turning to head back to her room. The other people traveling with her had yet to go to bed, and the oldest one among them, Professor Mo, even waved at her to join them.

"Shaohui, come take a look." Professor Mo was very happy, as though he had discovered some treasure. "They even have Chen Qingling, Chen-*laoshi*'s painting here."

Yang Shaohui had heard of Chen Qingling's name a few times before. She was not familiar with art, but Professor Mo held great interest towards it. Amongst the new stars in the country's art circle over the past few years, Chen Qingling could be considered very unique. Her works were described as being very honest, warm, and filled with human nature and freedom.

"I've collected quite a number of her works." Professor Mo leaned in closer to the painting, studying it carefully. "I've seen this painting in an exhibition before, and after asking about it, I heard that it wasn't for sale. I never thought I'd be able to see it here."

Yang Shaohui looked at it. Although she did not know how to evaluate art, she still felt that the painting was very good. Next to them, a young student asked, somewhat doubtful, "Is this the actual painting? Isn't it very expensive?"

Frowning, Yang Shaohui felt that his words were a little too much. Just as she was about to retort, they heard someone speak up by the door.

"This painting is not for sale." Chen Maoxiu was holding a fruit platter, his expression rather aloof, and his tone inflectionless. "Chen-*laoshi* gave it to me."

Professor Mo exclaimed in surprise, hurrying forward and holding Chen Maoxiu's hand warmly. "I'm also a fan of Chen-*laoshi*. Little Boss, your taste is very good."

Chen Maoxiu smiled enigmatically. As he demurred modestly, he called out to the rest to come and have some fruit. However, Yang Shaohui felt that he was implying something with what he said earlier, so she looked at him strangely.

Chen Maoxiu gave her a big smile. "Professor Yang, come have some fruit."

The Chen family's farm stay was called Cultural Hall and it included a guesthouse and a restaurant, as well as services like sightseeing tours and car rentals. The guesthouse consisted of two large villas with a total of eight rooms, and they had all been personally designed and furnished by Chen Maoxiu and Chen Qingling. Cultural Hall was very famous on various travel websites and blogs, and it was a must-visit destination for many social media influencers. During the holidays as well as peak tourist season, guests would need to make their reservations half a year in advance, and the reason why Yang Shaohui was able to book a spot this time was because it was the off-season.

The group had reserved an entire villa. At first, Yang Shaohui was not very interested in this farm stay that enjoyed great popularity online, feeling that it was only the result of very good marketing.

"This boss looks so strapping and rugged; I'd never thought that he would have such an eye for beauty," said Xiaosong after she finished her shower. She was sharing a room with Yang Shaohui. "The design of this villa is not something anyone can do. No wonder it's so popular on the internet."

Yang Shaohui smiled helplessly. "Isn't it just a few paintings by Chen Qingling? Look at how enchanted you guys are by them."

"It's not just the paintings. I suspect that this boss has some understanding about ballet as well. Do you know *The Nutcracker*? This place feels like the set of a ballet."

Yang Shaohui said, "I don't even have time to finish my experiments, nevermind the luxury to pursue such elegant interests."

Xiaosong pouted. "*Aiyah*, you're just too dull. Everyone needs to have a dream, and we should take the occasional moment to relax. We're here to have fun, yet you're focused on your experiment, how boring."

For some reason, Yang Shaohui was unable to come up with a response to that. She vaguely felt that a sore point somewhere inside her had just been poked at, yet she did not know the reason for the pain.

She suddenly wanted to go out for a smoke.

In the end, she never expected that she would end up bumping into someone in the yard.

Wearing a singlet, Chen Maoxiu was crouched down in front of a small plot of dirt, seemingly planting something.

Yang Shaohui had a cigarette in her hand. It would be awkward if she lit it, but it would also be awkward if she didn't.

Chen Maoxiu, however, laughed first. Like magic, an ashtray shaped like a lotus leaf appeared in his hand. "Do you need a lighter?"

Seeing how frank he was, Yang Shaohui's embarrassment diminished somewhat. She lit her cigarette, head lowered, and smiled. "I brought mine."

Chen Maoxiu did not say anything else. He placed the ashtray on the taihu stone table on the side, then returned to digging at the dirt.

"What are you planting?" Yang Shaohui took a drag of her cigarette as she asked him.

Under the light of the moon, Chen Maoxiu's face didn't look as rugged as it did in the day, even carrying a hint of softness. "Strawberries." Waving his hoe, he asked, "Professor Yang, do you want to see?"

Yang Shaohui waved. "Stop calling me Professor. It sounds really weird, and it's not like being a professor is anything great."

Chen Maoxiu raised a brow in surprise. "What's wrong with being a professor?"

Yang Shaohui smiled wryly. "A 30 year old, unmarried, female professor. Do you think that's a good thing?"

Chen Maoxiu was amused. "There's nothing wrong with that. A professor sounds so impressive and educated. As an illiterate person, I can only envy you."

Yang Shaohui did not know if he was being sincere or sarcastic, and responded a little sharply, "What's there to be envious about? People like me only know how to study."

"You know how to study and you think that's not impressive?" Chen Maoxiu stood up. Under the shade of the night, his expression looked a little earnest. "My good friend has always been a top student, ever since he was young. When he was accepted into university, the entire village lit firecrackers for him in celebration. What a thing to be proud of! Who wouldn't be envious of that?"

With her cigarette between her fingers, Yang Shaohui once again had no response. In the end, she could only take a long drag of her cigarette in frustration.

"My experiment has reached a bottleneck," she said suddenly, unclear if she was talking to herself or Chen Maoxiu. "I suddenly feel that it's very pointless… and I don't know why I'm even doing this."

Chen Maoxiu blinked, not speaking. He just crouched down slightly, removing the cigarette butt from Yang Shaohui's hand gently. The little, red ember was stubbed out onto the jade green 'lotus leaf'.

“Professor Yang should rest early.” Chen Maoxiu looked up, his eyes looking like they had been dyed with a stroke of moonlight. “Tomorrow morning, I still need to come and pick you up for your experiment.”

When Yang Shaohui woke up early the next morning, she was still thinking about the lotus leaf-shaped ashtray from last night. She kept feeling like she had never seen anything like it before. It looked very unique, perhaps she could buy one to bring home…

She headed downstairs. Chen Maoxiu was already there. On the table was congee, as well as dough fritters, soymilk, and a few other side dishes.

Yang Shaohui was surprised.

Smiling, Chen Maoxiu waved her over. “Professor Yang, come have breakfast.”

Yang Shaohui responded awkwardly, “I already said, don’t call me Professor anymore…” Tying her hair up, she sat down to try the congee. Upon realizing how tasty it was, she looked a little astonished.

Chen Maoxiu could tell and said, “I made it all myself, please eat lots.”

In the end, Yang Shaohui really did have two bowls, but was reluctant to leave the dough fritters and omelet behind, so Chen Maoxiu packed them up in a bag for her to take on the road.

As they had to travel to Lake Tai, Chen Maoxiu specifically selected his modified Jeep Wrangler for the journey. When Yang Shaohui approached the car, she discovered that there was someone else in the passenger seat.

Shen Shubao was dressed ready for labor. Getting out of the car, he nodded at her. “Hello, I’m Goumao’s friend.”

Yang Shaohui looked baffled. “Who is Goumao?”

Chen Maoxiu was a little embarrassed. “It’s me… This is my childhood friend, the top student I mentioned to you last night, the one our entire village lit firecrackers for.”

That had left quite the impression on Yang Shaohui, so she took another look at Shen Shubao again, unable to see exactly how he was a ‘top student’. Getting in the backseat, she asked, “He’ll be coming along with us?”

Chen Maoxiu explained, smiling, “Shubao’s going to Lake Tai to test out the engine he assembled.”

Yang Shaohui did not know what to say in response. What was this? Were villagers all so trendy and in with the times now?!

Of course she was too embarrassed to actually ask, since Shen Shubao and Chen Maoxiu both looked to be very earnest. On the way there, Shen Shubao’s occupational disease kicked in, and he started evaluating and comparing both domestic and foreign gearboxes and engines. When he realized that he had been speaking too much, he looked back, apologized to Yang Shaohui, and asked, “What

is Professor Yang researching?”

Although Yang Shaohui did not know much about cars, it was actually pretty interesting to listen to. With how polite Shen Shubao was, she also started to get very earnest. “I study the ecological environment.”

Chen Maoxiu responded, “Sounds very impressive.”

Yang Shaohui waved him off, speaking modestly, “It’s actually quite pointless… the experiments are hard to do, it’s difficult to apply for any project funding, and we don’t make much. There’s so much to do every day that we don’t even have time to sleep.”

As she spoke, Yang Shaohui paused, smacking her head and said, self-ridiculing, “See, I couldn’t help myself from complaining again.”

While driving, Chen Maoxiu turned back to glance at her and said as he smiled, “Then think of this trip as a vacation, and relax properly.”

Because they were going to the lake, the weather in the early morning was quite cool. Brushing across their faces, the lake wind was quite chilly. On the rocky bank were a few young people driving their go-karts. Shen Shubao took his equipment out from Chen Maoxiu’s car, ready to sweet-talk the youngsters into installing his engine. As for Yang Shaohui, she took out some bottles and jars that Chen Maoxiu did not understand, and headed towards the water’s edge.

“Are you collecting the water to take back for your experiments?” Chen Maoxiu stood next to Yang Shaohui, shielding her from the wind.

Yang Shaohui thought about it, then thought he probably wouldn’t understand even if she explained, so she just gave a succinct “Mn.” She was no longer as distant and reserved as before, and smiled as she said, “Has anyone mentioned that you’re really nice?”

“We’re in the service industry after all, customers above all.”

Yang Shaohui could not help but laugh, even though Chen Maoxiu hadn’t said anything funny.

Shen Shubao had actually managed to find someone to test out his engine. But In the end, after tinkering around for some time, the results were not very good. When he returned, Yang Shaohui wasn’t done collecting all her samples. Goumao was standing to the side, skipping stones.

“How many have you managed?” Shen Shubao asked.

“At most, eight.”

Shen Shubao threw his failed engine aside and rolled up his sleeves, looking as though he was about to vent his frustration. “I’m going to skip it fifteen times for you to see.”

Chen Maoxiu was speechless.

Yang Shaohui rested her chin in her hands, watching two fully grown men play around. At first she thought it was quite childish, but after watching for some time, she started to get a little envious.

"Professor Yang, do you want to try?" Chen Maoxiu held a rock out to her, demonstrating the movement. "Throw it like this."

Originally, Yang Shaohui wanted to refuse, but the other person was a step faster, tucking the rock into her hand. She could only stand up, copying the movements of the other two, and gave an attempt.

Perhaps it was beginner's luck or something. Her first rock skipped four times.

"Wow," Chen Maoxiu exclaimed, clapping. "As expected of a professor. A true genius, you're too clever!"

The compliments left Yang Shaohui feeling embarrassed, but she also did get a taste of the fun, so she found a few more rocks herself, tossing them. All of them managed to skip at least six times, and there was even one that skipped thirteen times. Even Shen Shubao came over to watch her.

"This really *does* depend on intelligence and talent," Shen Shubao concluded in the end. He looked disdainfully at Chen Maoxiu. "So you *are* dumb."

Chen Maoxiu kicked at him. "At least it's better than becoming bald like you."

Shen Shubao looked down. "Right now, my hair is still very thick. I can afford to lose some."

Covering her mouth, Yang Shaohui smiled. "Mr. Shen is still doing research during your rest days. Would this be considered overtime?"

"Overtime, my ass," Shen Shubao swore. "I'm working for a capitalist. There's no end no matter how exhausted I am."

Chen Maoxiu said, "At least you have job security. It's one of the Fortune 500 companies, it sounds so amazing when you tell others."

Under the sunlight, Shen Shubao laughed. "It's not as though I'm doing it for my dreams or interests. It's just a job to support myself. There's nothing amazing about that."

Yang Shaohui fell silent for a while before she said slowly, "Who isn't like that?"

Chen Maoxiu did not speak. He tossed another rock, and this time, it only skipped twice before sinking beneath the surface, never to be seen again. Shen Shubao glanced over at Yang Shaohui and said suddenly, "Although work is very tiring, and research is very tough, this is probably what it means to live."

Yang Shaohui looked up at him.

Nudging his glasses up his nose, Shen Shubao said peacefully, "I have prospects, goals, and I want to make something. Even if it's not what we like the most, as long as we continue, it feels like there's meaning to it. No matter the results, the process

still belongs to us."

Hearing him speak, for some reason, Yang Shaohui felt tears welling up within her. She looked away, caught in a bit of a state. Biting her lip, she did not respond, silently packing up her samples.

Goumao squatted down. "I'll help you."

With her head bowed, she discovered that the man seemed to be very adept at cleaning things up. The fragile glass containers had all been packed away very properly, none of the samples spilling out.

"Professor Yang." Chen Maoxiu packed her bag for her. After deliberating for a moment, he said, "I'm not very educated, nor am I as smart as Shubao. He might look like that, but he was just being modest just now. You've never seen his paycheck; his income tax rate is in the highest bracket, and his annual bonus is huge. He's the kind where even if he becomes bald, he can afford to pay for hair grafting."

Yang Shaohui burst out laughing.

Seeing her laugh, Chen Maoxiu also laughed with her, before continuing, "You might not realize it yourself, but in the eyes of people like me, being able to study well and do such research, you're really someone with great knowledge and wisdom."

He looked at Yang Shaohui, his eyes bright. "Even if you face some difficulties during the process, it doesn't negate yourself and the hard work you've put in so far, alright?"

The three of them only headed back to Cultural Hall once it was evening. Yang Shaohui did not speak much, but her state was completely different from how it was before. Her hair was loose and she rested against the car window lazily, looking out at the scenery. The leftover rays of the setting sun lay gently upon her face, her eyes half-lidded, enjoying the warmth.

Chen Maoxiu glanced at her through the rearview mirror, unable to stop himself from smiling.

It had been a long time since Shen Shubao ate at Cultural House, so naturally, he followed them out of the car, about to openly freeload a meal. Yang Shaohui brought cigarettes and wine over to their table, asking them generously, "Would you like a cigarette?"

Chen Maoxiu did not smoke, but Shen Shubao accepted. Yang Shaohui clinked her glass with his, sharing a sense of appreciation with each other, both being in the research field.

Between Yang Shaohui's fair fingers was a cigarette, and she looked at the lotus leaf-shaped ashtray. "Do you guys sell this?"

Chen Maoxiu responded, "We've made quite a few. If you want it, I'll give one to you."

Exhaling a smoke ring, Yang Shaohui laughed soundlessly. "Thanks."

After some drinks, and a couple of cigarettes, Yang Shaohui looked at Chen Maoxiu, suddenly asking, “What about the little boss? How do you feel about your life right now?”

Shen Shubao laughed. “He doesn’t have that many concerns in his brain, his days are spent as happy as a lark.”

“Who says I don’t have concerns?” Chen Maoxiu’s habit of tidying things up was like an occupational hazard. Even when he was serving up dishes, he would insist on placing the plates perfectly on the table. “I’m worried about lots of things — Qingling-*zi*’s exhibitions, Jiang Shen’s performances, Richie Rich Bai’s match livestreams, as well as what I should cook for you when you come here every week.” He shook his head dramatically, exactly like an auntie. “I’m just destined for a life of labor.”

Yang Shaohui was amused. “You don’t worry about yourself?” Pausing, she seemed to have realized something. “Who is Qingling-*zi*?”

Chen Maoxiu looked very pleased, his expression screaming ‘you’ve finally asked the right question’. He pointed at the painting that Professor Mo had liked a lot, bragging, “Chen Qingling, she’s my younger sister.”

Yang Shaohui was shocked.

Chen Maoxiu poured out more wine for her and Shen Shubao. Crossing his legs, he said joyfully, “My dreams are extremely ordinary. When everyone is feeling upset, they can come over to my place and relax. When they’re happy, they’ll also come here to celebrate. As for anything else, I never thought much about it.”

“Professor Yang.” Chen Maoxiu raised his glass, toasting her. He blinked. “When your experiment is a success, don’t forget to come back here.”

He smiled. “I’ll pick strawberries for you to eat.”

## Extra 2 — Honeyed Love

Jiang Shen's 'first dance' was only officially performed on stage when he was twenty years old. Ever since he won the gold at the Prix de Lausanne when he was seventeen, this new star of the ballet world had the world's attention on him. Due to various competitions, his 'first dance' had been delayed for two years, and for the media, it was a huge loss.

Fortunately, Liu Xingzhi's return filled up the gap of these two years.

In the words of the industry, during his one year of seclusion, Liu Xingzhi seemed to have received the blessing of the 'God of the Grasslands'. Not only did his technique not regress in the slightest, there was even a huge advancement in regards to his expressiveness when dancing. In the next two years, he swept the board of many ballet competitions in Russia and France, and the latest news even stated that he would be performing in Jiang Shen's 'first dance'…

"The media really doesn't know how to speak." Early in the morning, Song Xin was seated cross-legged on the floor of her own dance studio. With her iPad in hand, she looked at some of the media accounts on Weibo that focused on dance news. Clicking her tongue, she said, "What 'stooping to dance in this performance', what 'extremely touching relationship between the senior and the junior'? It's only because you offered him enough money!"

Jiang Shen had already finished one round of practice. Soaked in sweat, he casually removed his singlet, drinking some water as he sat down in front of Song Xin.

"*Shixiong* already gave me a discount." Jiang Shen laughed. He had just celebrated his twentieth birthday last month, and the tenderness of youth was no longer apparent on his facial features. Instead, he exuded an air of gentleness and delicateness. "The price the other theatres and dance troupes pay for *Shixiong* to dance with them is truly terrifying. He has already been very good to me."

Unable to tolerate what she was hearing, Song Xin replied, "Yes yes yes, Principal Liu is the best."

Jiang Shen's smile didn't dim and he didn't speak. Looking down, he removed his ballet shoes, stretching his ankles. Looking at him, Song Xin raised a brow. "When you go back, don't practice anymore. Get a massage and relax. You still need to pay attention to yourself despite the high-intensity rehearsals going on now."

"I know." Jiang Shen nodded. "Bai Jinyi will give me a massage."

"Oooh," Song Xin exclaimed, unable to stop herself from being nosy. "Are you two sleeping together already? What are you doing at night?"

Her original intention was only to tease him. After all, Bai Jinyi and Jiang Shen had been together for so many years already, they were basically an old, married couple. Whether it was people within the boxing and ballet circles or beyond, they were all very kind towards this fairytale-like couple. Most reporters would not go

overboard when reporting about them, but of course, the paparazzi were still very dedicated. Fortunately, the two had won many awards and merits. Most people could not even catch up with the news about their accomplishments, so they had no time to be interested in various rumors and gossip at all.

In the end, Song Xin never expected that her question would bring about a blush on Jiang Shen's cheeks.

He stammered, "N-no, we d-don't do anything…"

Blinking, Song Xin asked, baffled, "What do you mean you don't do anything? Shouldn't you guys have collected your marriage license three years ago, have two children, and be in the process of growing old together already?!"

Jiang Shen did not know what to say to that.

To make it more convenient for Jiang Shen, a long time ago, Bai Jinyi had already bought a house in the city — using his own money that he had earned from boxing. Jiang Shen had actually earned a fair bit of money over the past two years as well, including prize money that he had won. However, Bai Jinyi had told him to keep it for living expenses, so in the end, the house was purchased by Bai Jinyi, while Jiang Shen was the one in charge of giving Bai Jinyi his pocket money.

In the eyes of others, they were living the life of a fairytale couple. In actual fact, although they were a couple, whether they were fairytale-like or not was still up in the air.

Bai Jinyi's schedule was tightly packed with his professional matches. To maintain peak condition, every day, he would spend no less than twelve hours in the boxing gym. Each time there was an important match, he would have to spend a month or two in the States, receiving guidance from Mayweather. At the same time, Jiang Shen's schedule was not any easier than his, with practices, rehearsals, performances, and competitions. Looking at the whole picture, if they could spend a week together during a month, it was considered a luxury.

Just like right now, Jiang Shen's 'first dance' was coming up. Bai Jinyi had completely put aside everything to do with his matches, and was finally able to accompany him for the past two months or so.

"You're back?" Even if he was not training intensely, Bai Jinyi could not ignore his usual conditioning training. Whenever Jiang Shen was off at rehearsals, Bai Jinyi would take the opportunity to go over to Lai Song's gym before coming back home. He was dressed in a hooded tank top, and his hair had just been cut to a short stubble recently, setting off his very good-looking face.

When Jiang Shen called out, "I'm back", he was immediately wrapped within Bai Jinyi's arms. The boxer didn't seem to think that was enough, and with a little bit of effort, he lifted Jiang Shen up into the air, swaying him.

"You went on a diet?" Bai Jinyi asked. "It feels like you're lighter again."

Jiang Shen shook his head. "No, I've even put on muscle recently." He lifted his arm, showing off his bicep. "Look."

Bai Jinyi laughed. “Just that tiny, little thing? What’s there to see?”

Jiang Shen pinched Bai Jinyi’s arm, discovering that it was really very hard.

Bai Jinyi carried Jiang Shen all the way into the kitchen, placing him on the marble counter. Forcing one thigh between Jiang Shen’s legs, he found out that the dancer already had a reaction.

“Male dancers are even more sensitive.” It wasn’t clear if this statement was true or false, but in any case, in front of him, Jiang Shen had always reacted very easily. Bai Jinyi never needed to tease him much before he would end up nearly melting limply into a puddle. Of course, as a dancer, his body was already very flexible.

The first time the two had sex, perhaps because it was both their first time, the process had been rather wretched. Later on, together with their very packed schedule, they dared not indulge too deeply every time they had sex. There seemed to be no end to Bai Jinyi’s patience and concern, always worried about Little Swan’s practice, and in the end, most of the time, he could only box to vent his excess energy and desire.

“Can you take a few days’ break after this?” Bai Jinyi asked as he kissed Jiang Shen.

Dazed, Jiang Shen responded, “I can… the rehearsals are going well, and *Shixiong* still needs a few days before he arrives…”

Bai Jinyi pulled back a little. His eyes were slightly lidded, and there seemed to be flames burning within. “Really?”

His face reddening, Jiang Shen nodded.

Bai Jinyi grinned. Reaching over his head, he grabbed the hood of his tank top and pulled it off, before leaning forward and wrapping his arms around Jiang Shen’s waist.

While being kissed, Jiang Shen pressed his palms against Bai Jinyi’s well-defined, muscular chest. His entire brain seemed to be filled with fog.

Having been boxing for so many years, Bai Jinyi’s strength was naturally not for show. He lifted Jiang Shen up, gesturing at the other person to wrap his legs around his waist.

“Hold tight.” He patted Jiang Shen’s butt a little wickedly.

Jiang Shen was unable to even say a word, yet he wrapped his legs around Bai Jinyi’s waist obediently .

Bai Jinyi reached down in front of Jiang Shen, removing his underwear. The latter’s cock immediately bounced out, and with only a few strokes, the tip was dripping wet, the fluids smearing on Bai Jinyi’s hand.

Jiang Shen shut his eyes, probably because he was too embarrassed to continue looking, and even the corners of his eyes had reddened.

Bai Jinyi bent his head down, kissing him. “Why are you getting shy? We’ve done it so many times already.”

Jiang Shen still refused to open his eyes.

Bai Jinyi did not force him. Instead, he pulled out a bottle of lube from a drawer under the marble counter. Feeling a sudden coolness on him, Jiang Shen looked down reflexively.

“… When did you put that in the kitchen?” Jiang Shen endured the strange feeling of being stretched as he asked Bai Jinyi softly.

Bai Jinyi’s fingers were rough and his knuckles were wide, but when he was stretching Jiang Shen out, he was extremely gentle, not at all hurried. “I bought over a hundred bottles, and stashed them in every possible spot in the house.”

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Seeing that he was lubed and stretched enough, Bai Jinyi finally scooped Jiang Shen up, his hands on his butt. He signalled the dancer to hold onto the shelf above the marble counter, and inched himself in bit by bit.

“Today’s dinner.” He smiled, leaning down and sharing a kiss with Jiang Shen. With their lips pressed together, he said quietly, “Thank you for your hospitality.”

★

Jiang Shen never thought that there would be a day he would be treated as dinner. Pressed down into the kitchen counter, he was completely devoured by Bai Jinyi.

A dancer’s body was extremely flexible, and despite the size constraints of the kitchen, it did not hinder the positions in which they made love at all. Lifting one of Jiang Shen’s legs up, Bai Jinyi entered him from behind, and Jiang Shen could only look for another form of support, pointing the foot that was lifted onto the counter and putting his weight on it.

For other people, this position might be a little difficult, but for him, it was just a lift and a stretch. If not for how hard Bai Jinyi was thrusting, he could even lift his leg a little higher…

Just as Jiang Shen was starting to feel fuzzy, the person behind him pulled his chin towards him. Bai Jinyi leaned in close, kissing him as he asked, “What are you thinking about?”

“N-nothing…” The thrusts made Jiang Shen’s toes curl, yet Bai Jinyi still grabbed the arch of his foot wickedly.

“D-don’t touch…” Jiang Shen stammered as he moaned.

Bai Jinyi asked deliberately, “Don’t touch? Where?”

As a result, Jiang Shen refused to respond. Bai Jinyi turned him around, lifted him up face to face. Jiang Shen’s legs automatically wrapped around his waist.

With the aid of lube, Bai Jinyi slipped in easily once more.

Jiang Shen had already cum once earlier, and his front was sticky and wet. Even so, Bai Jinyi still refused to let him touch himself. When he was about to cum for the second time, his entire body was starting to redden, the blush spreading from his chest up to his neck. Unable to control himself, Bai Jinyi leaned down, biting his collarbone. With such intense stimulation, Jiang Shen came again.

Seeing that he really was unable to carry on, Bai Jinyi finally increased the speed of his thrusts. In the end, however, he pulled out, cum splattering against his hole instead.

“We should wear condoms next time,” Bai Jinyi panted, kissing Jiang Shen’s forehead, “go and take a bath first.”

The bathtub was something Bai Jinyi had insisted on installing when they were renovating. Very much like a young girl, he even bought a bunch of bath bombs, and the two of them submerged themselves in the bubbly, white foam, holding each other in their arms.

In the end, as they bathed, Bai Jinyi became aroused again.

As the bathtub was rectangular, Jiang Shen could only stretch his legs out of the bathtub to allow Bai Jinyi easier access. He really was extremely flexible, and the size of the bathtub didn’t stop him from pretty much performing a split. His ass was once again gripped tightly by Bai Jinyi, and the latter seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of energy. By the end, Jiang Shen’s entire body weight was hanging off of Bai Jinyi, yet it was as though he was weightless to the boxer.

This time around, Bai Jinyi spilled inside him unceremoniously. Even after the post-orgasmic glow had faded, he still lingered inside, unwilling to pull out.

The two of them kissed within the bubbles, unable to pull themselves apart.

“I’ll help clean you up,” Bai Jinyi finally said.

Jiang Shen spread his legs lazily, allowing Bai Jinyi to do as he pleased. With nothing else to do, he scooped some foam up and piled it on top of Bai Jinyi’s head.

Bai Jinyi looked up, and Jiang Shen spread some foam on his brows.

“What are you doing?” Bai Jinyi couldn’t help but laugh.

Jiang Shen sighed. “Like this, you’ve become an old man.”

Bai Jinyi did not speak, but piled some bubbles up on top of Jiang Shen’s head as well.

“Together.” Bai Jinyi turned his head, pressing a kiss to Jiang Shen’s lips. “We’ll grow old with each other.”

Early in the morning, Liu Xingzhi headed straight to Song Xin’s studio the moment he stepped off the train. When he arrived, he did not see his junior, and was instead encircled by many tiny, little swans.

Song Xin's expression showed that he came at the perfect time. "Would Principal Liu help me teach the little students?"

Liu Xingzhi was completely trapped by the group of seven or eight year olds, and a gutsy girl even climbed up to his shoulders, grabbing at his dreadlocks. Liu Xingzhi had no choice but to hold one child in each arm, asking in annoyance, "Where's Jiang Shen?"

Song Xin said placidly, "He needs to rest as well. Why so impatient?"

Liu Xingzhi didn't know what to say.

Speaking as though she was completely right, Song Xin said, "Just as well. You can take over the class for your junior. Look how much the children like you."

Amidst his grogginess, by the time Jiang Shen realized that his phone was vibrating, Bai Jinyi had already answered it for him..

It was extremely noisy on Liu Xingzhi's end, and little girls could be heard chattering away beside his head. "Hello, Jiang Shen?!"

Raising a brow, Bai Jinyi said indifferently, "He's asleep."

Even if he was deaf, Liu Xingzhi would still be able to tell whose voice that was. Blinking, he asked, in a bad temper, "Richie Rich Bai, did you fuck something up again?"

Bai Jinyi did not feel a sense of guilt at all. "Other than fucking, what else could I have done?"

Liu Xingzhi was speechless.

"We can meet up tonight, you sound like you're busy."

Liu Xingzhi was about to spit blood from anger. "Am I the busy one, or is it you guys?!"

After hanging up, Bai Jinyi returned to the bedroom. Jiang Shen was sitting up, hugging the blanket. He was naked, and was rubbing his eyes, still bleary from sleep. "Was that *Shixiong*?"

"He's at Song Xin's dance studio."

Jiang Shen was shocked. "He's here so early?" He wanted to grab his phone, but Bai Jinyi did not give it back to him.

"I told him we'd see him tonight." Bai Jinyi tossed the phone to the side, laying back down on top of Jiang Shen. Having just woken up, Jiang Shen seemed to be even more sensitive than usual. His face flushed a bright red, but he was unable to stop Bai Jinyi's hands. With his manhood in someone else's grip, he dared not move at all, and could only moan awkwardly a few times.

"I restrained myself last night." Bai Jinyi pulled out another bottle of lube from the bedside table. "You're not injured back there at all."

Jiang Shen wasn't able to come up with a retort. Yesterday had looked intense, but in reality, Bai Jinyi had taken care of him very well, and he wasn't swollen or red. In the end, Jiang Shen managed to escape by feigning sleep, but right now, he felt like Bai Jinyi was a hooligan out to collect payment.

The huge bed in the bedroom was selected by Bai Jinyi personally, the solid wood frame in the style that he preferred. Of course, the most comfortable part of it was the latex mattress that cost 40,000RMB, claiming that it could mould to the curves of the body perfectly.

Bai Jinyi lifted Jiang Shen up, set him on his hips, and lay down face to face. Jiang Shen's front and back were both dripping wet, yet Bai Jinyi was in no hurry to move on to the next step.

He paid a little attention to Jiang Shen's front, before thrusting his hips up and saying huskily, "Come sit."

With no choice, Jiang Shen grabbed the curtain next to the bed with one hand as he held onto Bai Jinyi's cock with the other, trying to ease himself down slowly.

"Slower." Bai Jinyi squeezed his ass. Jiang Shen was so tight around him that he felt a little discomfort. "Relax."

Jiang Shen took a deep breath, trying his best to relax. He really had to wonder how that thing of Bai Jinyi's grew. It was just like his muscles, big and hard.

Once he was fully inside, Bai Jinyi licked his lips, and said suddenly, "Do a split."

The stimulation brought tears of pleasure to Jiang Shen's eyes and he thought he had heard wrong. "What?"

Grabbing Jiang Shen's full butt cheeks, he thrusted upwards lightly. "Come on, do a split."

Although Jiang Shen did not know the reason for his request, he spread his legs wide apart obediently. In this position, his legs were like one long line on top of Bai Jinyi's body, and from Bai Jinyi's angle, everything was displayed clearly, the view unimpeded.

Jiang Shen was not heavy, but he had muscles in all the right places, strong and beautiful. Even as he sat on Bai Jinyi in a split, he did not need the other person to support him. The lines of his backside curved full and smooth, and when arched, it was like the string on a bow pulled taut. Due to passion, his entire chest was covered in a flush of red. Along with a thin, gleaming layer of sweat, he looked especially enchanting.

As though having tasted the sweetness of pleasure, Jiang Shen did not need Bai Jinyi to move, and started to rock up and down by himself. His ass bounced against Bai Jinyi's balls, producing lewd slaps that rang across the room. Bai Jinyi decided to just let go, placing both his hands behind his head instead, admiring the beautiful view on top of him.

Jiang Shen wanted to touch himself, but was once again denied by Bai Jinyi. The boxer reached out with one hand, grabbing his wrist and holding it behind his back, so Jiang Shen could only rely on the muscles of his waist to bounce himself up and down. Finally, just as he could no longer hold on anymore, he came.

Spurts of cum landed on Bai Jinyi's abdomen, and he too, reached his peak at the same time. Not letting a single drop escape, he spilled inside Jiang Shen entirely.

As the aftershock of the orgasm ebbed away, Jiang Shen sprawled across Bai Jinyi's chest, sleepiness overcoming him again. Naturally, Bai Jinyi couldn't just let him fall asleep like that, and carried the boy off to the bathroom to clean up. As Bai Jinyi dressed him, Jiang Shen kept nodding off. Bai Jinyi cupped his face, kissing him a few times. "Liu Xingzhi is still waiting."

Hearing the name 'Liu Xingzhi', Jiang Shen finally woke up, rubbing his eyes as he mumbled, "… I nearly forgot."

Bai Jinyi raised a brow. "It's fine if you forget. Shall we head back to bed then?"

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Waiting in the dance studio until his expression had grew darker and darker, Liu Xingzhi finally saw the arrival of his junior who had been 'indulging in beauty' and 'had no desire for improvement'. The junior was clearly also aware of his unpardonable crimes, and was very meek and docile, sitting obediently in front of his senior as he waited to be scolded.

Bai Jinyi had followed Jiang Shen to the dance studio. Song Xin kept winking and making faces at him, but was completely ignored.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Liu Xingzhi had his arms crossed as well. Although he was trying his hardest to look stern, there were too many children around, plastering and clinging onto him, tugging at his dreadlocks and clambering into his arms.

Jiang Shen sneaked a few looks at his senior, and gathered up his courage. "*Shixiong*… Everyone wishes to see you dance."

Liu Xingzhi mocked him, "Do *you* still want to dance or not?"

"Of course I do."

"If that's the case, then practice abstinence!" Liu Xingzhi raised his voice. "Otherwise, how are you going to dance?!"

Receiving such a scolding, Jiang Shen could only remain docile, hanging his head pitifully.

After he was done, Liu Xingzhi regretted it a little. Just as he was about to comfort his junior a little, he caught sight of Bai Jinyi standing lazily by the door, one arm resting against the doorframe.

"Actually, there's no point in scolding him," the young boxing king said calmly and steadily, "After all, I'm the one in charge when it comes to sex."

Liu Xingzhi was speechless.

## Extra 3 —The Branch to The Stars

The reason why Liu Xingzhi found out that he was adopted was because of a physical check up at school.

Ever since he was a child, other children on the grasslands often mocked him, calling him a ‘feral child’ because of his looks. However, his parents were loving, and his brother was doting. Liu Xingzhi had always thought it was just a quirk in his genes.

Sobbing all the way home, Liu Xingzhi was extremely upset, yet neither his parents nor his brother were very concerned. Instead, they took him out to ride horses, to see the milky way in the night sky, and to watch the falcons flying above the grasslands. In the eyes of his parents and brother, Liu Xingzhi was a proud, little wolf cub.

“You’re the son of the grasslands.” Liu Xingzhi’s mother braided his hair as she smiled. “The god of harvest brought you to us, and we couldn’t be more grateful.”

Lying across the knees of his brother, Wendusu, at that moment, Liu Xingzhi seemed to have understood everything.

Compared to the matter of his adoption, the second time Liu Xingzhi felt at a loss was when he was in second grade.

That afternoon, the school had organized a showcase to exhibit their students’ artistic talents, and Liu Xingzhi had signed up. Although it was a showcase, due to the conditions in Inner Mongolia, there weren’t many performances.

One of them was a ballet, and it was the *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grasslands*.

It was the first time that eight-year-old Liu Xingzhi had come into contact with ballet. The dancers were not from a professional dance troupe, and they couldn’t even be considered very good. When the female dancer went en pointe, her lower body wasn’t even steady enough. Not many children stayed back to watch, and Liu Xingzhi was the only one who watched until the end.

He still didn’t want to leave, even after the dancers had taken their bows. He sneaked backstage just to take a few more looks at the dancers’ shoes.

The amateur ballet troupe was not pretentious at all. Seeing how young and cute Liu Xingzhi was, they indulged him. The dancer in the role of the younger sister even gifted him her own ballet shoes.

And so Liu Xingzhi carried a pair of female ballet shoes home. The first thing he did when he saw his parents was to tell them that he wanted to learn ballet.

At that time, they were still living on the grasslands. In order to attend a proper ballet class, they would need to travel nearly a hundred kilometers to the city. As a result, Liu Xingzhi’s father sold one third of their land, and his mother stopped

herding horses, accompanying Liu Xingzhi to the city to learn ballet instead.

Very often, talent was like the stars. To some, they were unreachable, while others were born with their eyes full of them.

Liu Xingzhi was a fortunate soul with eyes full of stars.

The toughest, hardest initial stage didn't pose any difficulty for him. When Liu Xingzhi reached an age where he wanted to develop in the direction of professional ballet, there were no longer any suitable teachers for him in Inner Mongolia.

The Aodun family held a family meeting once again. The objective was not to stop Liu Xingzhi from learning ballet, but to decide where he would go to learn ballet.

"Muqi'er, is there any teacher you'd like to learn from?" Wendusu asked.

Liu Xingzhi thought for a moment, then answered seriously, "Shen Junyi."

Wendusu was not very familiar with the ballet world. He spent some time looking into Shen Junyi, and when he returned, his expression was very serious. "He's a great dancer in Shanghai. If you go looking for him, and he doesn't accept you, what are you going to do?"

Liu Xingzhi's face was stern, as he said confidently, "I'll make him accept me. I'm Aodun Muqi'er, and I'll become the world's greatest dancer."

His mother laughed. "Not even a wolf cub would dare say something so arrogant."

And so the twelve-year-old Liu Xingzhi and his mother arrived in Shanghai, and Liu Xingzhi became a student of Shen Junyi. At the age of fifteen, he became renowned with one dance, winning the top prize at the National Ballet Competition. When he was sixteen, he competed in the Prix de Lausanne. Liu Xingzhi was like a dazzling comet, shining brightly on the world stage.

Liu Xingzhi, whose path had always been smooth, once thought that he would eventually reach the peak, towering above everyone else. However, Jiang Shen's arrival changed everything.

Liu Xingzhi embraced the sky, while Jiang Shen loved the earth.

That youth had talent that far surpassed anyone else, as well as rich emotions that were purer and deeper.

Many years later, the two stood on par with each other at the pinnacle of the ballet world. Occasionally, they would chat about the first ballet they watched.

Jiang Shen searched through his memories for a long time. "Ah, I remember now. Back then, at the Children's Center, I saw two girls dancing to the *Heroic Little Sisters of the Grasslands*. After that, I said I wanted to learn ballet."

Liu Xingzhi was a little shocked. Gazing at his junior, slowly, he started to laugh.

"Next time, we can choreograph a pas de deux," said Liu Xingzhi.

“What would the dance be called?”

Liu Xingzhi thought for a moment and said, “We’ll call it *The Swan and the Stars*.”

## Extra 4 — The Swan and the Stars

When Shen Junyi was nearly sixty, he officially bade farewell to the stage. With such prestige within the ballet circle, he would still participate in choreographing ballets, even after retiring. At his level, there was not much for him to be concerned about, except for one issue — who would take over Laiyi.

Jiang Shen and Liu Xingzhi had already established their own studio ‘Swan Star’, and Jing Luoyun had her own ‘Paradise’ as well. The three great dancers of Laiyi had all done well for themselves, each branching out on their own. Shen Junyi was very happy for them, but his feelings were complicated as well. In the end, he never thought that after so many years, Zhou Luoxiang would actually come knocking on his door.

“The children will all find their own paths in life.” Despite having advanced in age, Zhou Luoxiang still looked the same. Dancers were innately more careful about their figures than ordinary people, and at most, there were a few more crinkles at the corners of his eyes. “They have their own careers, and staying at Laiyi isn’t necessarily the best path.”

Getting older, Shen Junyi’s temper also grew. He snorted, not deigning to give a response.

Zhou Luoxiang did not mind. Drinking his tea, he said placidly, “Besides, Ai Lai and I can help you manage Laiyi.”

Shen Junyi side eyed him. “You think I don’t know what’s running through your mind?”

Zhou Luoxiang laughed. “I’ve had these thoughts running through my mind all these years, it’s not the first day you’ve known about it. Without them, could Laiyi have developed into what it is today?”

Shen Junyi thought about it, and really couldn’t come up with a rebuttal. However, he also did not want to come to a consensus with Zhou Luoxiang, so he remained silent, not speaking.

Zhou Luoxiang had long been used to his temper. Filling up his teacup, he smiled. “*Shixiong*, thank you.”

“*Shixiong*!” Jiang Shen shouted at Liu Xingzhi, who was on the stage.

The tall, sturdy, young, Mongolian man turned to look at him, his long dreadlocks scattered across his shoulders. “Why so loud?”

Jiang Shen laughed. “Quick, come look at this part of the choreography.”

Digging a finger into his ear, Liu Xingzhi left the stage unwillingly.

Unable to wait anymore, Jiang Shen went over to pull him. “Come, quick.”

Liu Xingzhi humphed.

The choreographers were all gathered in front of the laptop. The current times were unlike the past. Nowadays, when working on choreography, they were able to create a 3D animation of it, presenting a better view of how the dance would look onstage.

Jiang Shen clicked the mouse a few times, playing it for Liu Xingzhi.

"They'll all gather here, then spread apart, becoming the image of the moon." He explained while the animation played. At first, Liu Xingzhi wasn't paying much attention, but his expression gradually became more serious.

"You'll be dancing the principal role?" Liu Xingzhi asked abruptly.

"Ah?" Jiang Shen was surprised. "*Shixiong*, you're not going to do it?"

Liu Xingzhi watched the animation once more, this time carefully. "You're more suited for this choreography."

Jiang Shen hadn't noticed. Ever since he and Liu Xingzhi had established the studio together, they had never minded who took the principal role, and who took the supporting role. The most important thing was to present the best performance.

"You'll dance the principal role," Liu Xingzhi said decisively, "start rehearsing now."

Jiang Shen was speechless.

Once Liu Xingzhi came to a decision, no one would be able to sway him. After a few days of rehearsals, with Jiang Shen dancing the principal role, it was just as Liu Xingzhi had said. This dance was truly more suited for Jiang Shen's expressiveness.

Onstage, young dancers were immersed entirely in the dance; beautiful, pointed feet and rhythmic, evocative waist movements. Jiang Shen ended the dance with a grand jeté and a pirouette, and the corps de ballet all leapt up at the same time. Below the stage, Shen Junyi and the others all stood up simultaneously, applauding the dancers.

Looking very pleased with himself, Liu Xingzhi gave Jiang Shen a thumbs-up from below the stage, his eyes full of cockiness.

Jiang Shen wiped his sweat away, giving him a smile.

As it was a rehearsal, other than a few teachers, Jiang Shen's friends and family also came.

For once, Bai Jinyi did not have a match, and he sat right in the first row.

Jiang Shen sat down next to him.

"How did I do?" Jiang Shen asked.

Bai Jinyi had never been stingy with his praise for him. "Excellent."

Jiang Shen chuckled, then waved his hand. "*Shixiong*!"

Liu Xingzhi swaggered over, asking carelessly, “What?”

With great sincerity, Jiang Shen said, “Thank you, *Shixiong*.”

Liu Xingzhi raised a brow. “Why are you thanking me?”

“Thank you for letting me dance the principal role.”

Liu Xingzhi sniffed. “That’s because you’re suited for it. If you weren’t, I wouldn’t have let you have it.”

Smiling with his mouth closed, Jiang Shen nodded. “I know, *Shixiong* does everything for my own good.”

Liu Xingzhi was still stubborn. “I didn’t.”

Of course Jiang Shen did not mind how his actions contradicted his words, and thanked him again earnestly. “Thank you, *Shixiong*.”

*Thank you, for being willing to be my senior in this lifetime.*

## Extra 5 —The Sextet

(With cameos of characters from *Nianhua* and *Suiyuejian)*

As they grew older, after spending so much time with the literary middle-aged man Old Mister Shen, Xia Yiyang had also cultivated a bit of an ability to appreciate the fine arts.

Shen Luo recently had started filming vlogs, and there were a few niche companies from Suzhou who dealt with a more alternative art scene that invited him to film a few commercial films for them.

"I've interacted with Gorilla Vinyl before." Ji Qinyang usually spent more time chatting with Shen Luo, as though they were maintaining a diplomatic relationship between the tops. "Their boss is rather interesting, and his wife is running a vintage store."

Shen Luo's gaze shifted to the other man's feet, and Ji Qinyang cocked his feet up, flaunting his vintage-looking Dr. Martens. "Xie Meng bought them."

Raising a brow, Shen Luo gave a perfunctory smile.

Previously, he had taken a few cover images for Ji Qinyang's new album, who then released a few vinyls, giving them one. To prove that he was a qualified fan of Mr. Ji, Xia Yiyang rushed off excitedly to buy an expensive record player, and every day, he would play Mr. Ji's ten songs repeatedly. Meanwhile, the entire home KTV system that Shen Luo had bought for him was entirely neglected.

"What has Ji-laoshi been busy with recently?" Raising his newly purchased GoPro, Shen Luo aimed the lens towards Ji Qinyang's face.

Perhaps because he was aware of how good-looking he was, Ji Qinyang had his arms crossed, not caring at all about the state of his hair. He tilted his head. "I'm writing the theme song for a ballet."

Shen Luo was stunned. He poked his head out from behind the GoPro, asking in slight disbelief, "Ballet…??"

Xia Yiyang flipped through a thick magazine, The Artistry of Ballet, with great seriousness. The expressions flitting across his face could be described as rich and varied, his reverence evident to all. Looking like this was an everyday occurrence, Shen Luo made himself a cup of coffee.

"Do you want some milk?" He asked Xia Yiyang.

Xia Yiyang did not hear what he said at all. "Ji-laoshi really is too impressive!"

Shen Luo was speechless. Drinking some of his coffee, he thought for a moment then said seriously, "The album cover of the impressive Ji-laoshi was shot by me."

"Mn mn," Xia Xiyang said a little perfunctorily, "you're very impressive too! Muah muah!"

Muacks your ass, Shen Luo cursed internally, his face dark.

Xia Yiyang had only just praised Ji Qinyang a second ago, but this devotion seemed to be on thin ice the very next moment. “Look at this.” He rotated and showed Shen Luo The Artistry of Ballet. “Jiang Shen, Jiang-laoshi, one of the founders of Swan Star, a top ballet troupe in our country. He’s only 25 years old, and he’s a frequent judge in top A-tier international ballet competitions. Have you seen this photo?”

Glancing placidly at the photo, Shen Luo gave an “Oh”.

Xia Yiyang clicked his tongue. “Look properly!”

“What?” Old Mister Shen raised his coffee cup, speaking unhurriedly, “You want to dance ballet?”

Xia Yiyang was speechless.

Attending a live ballet performance for the first time ever, Xia Yiyang was undoubtedly nervous. He pulled out the suit he had just purchased during the New Year, and halfway through putting it on, Shen Luo happened to enter the room, in the midst of tying a tie.

“I’ll help you.” Xia Yiyang took over his tie, tying a Windsor knot skillfully.

Looking at the vest Xia Yiyang was wearing, Shen Luo suddenly said, “As expected, the color I picked looks very good.”

Xia Yiyang laughed. “Yes, you have great taste.”

Shen Luo laughed along. He did not speak, but watched as Xia Yiyang straightened his collar and pulled on the suit jacket.

“We’re wearing couple clothes.” Xia Yiyang pulled Shen Luo over to the mirror, his joy so evident that he became a little embarrassed. “I’ll buy you a bouquet later.”

Shen Luo chuckled. He could not help but nuzzle against Xia Yiyang’s forehead with his head.

When the two arrived at the theatre, Xie Meng was already there. The seats they had selected were naturally the best in the VIP section, and upon seeing Xia Yiyang, Xie Meng stood up, waving at them.

Only after walking over to their row did Xia Yiyang realise there was someone sitting on Xie Meng’s right. It was quite spacious between the rows of the VIP section, but that person was like a little mountain sitting there. It wouldn’t be easy for Xia Yiyang to squeeze over to Xie Meng’s left side, and so he could only sit down moodily.

Xie Meng was his usual gentle, reserved self. They had not seen each other in a while, and it seemed like he had cut his hair. The ends were a little short, revealing his slender, fair neck. “Let me introduce you. This is the boxing king Bai Jinyi,

Jiang Shen, Jiang-laoshi's friend."

Hearing the words 'boxing king', Xia Yiyang was completely stunned. After all, other than his figure, there was not a single characteristic of Bai Jinyi that could be related to boxing, and he looked to be around just twenty-five or twenty-six, or perhaps even younger. Holding his hand out towards Xia Yiyang, Bai Jinyi exuded an air of intractableness as he said lazily, "Hello."

Xia Yiyang shook his hand, stammering, "H-hello…"

Bai Jinyi's gaze slid past him, landing on Shen Luo. He nodded. "Mr. Shen."

Shen Luo froze for a couple of seconds, surmising that the other had probably recognized him because of Ji Qinyang.

Just as expected, Bai Jinyi pulled out Ji Qinyang's new album from his pocket. "Little Swan likes Ji-*laoshi*'s music very much, and this album cover has the highest rating so far. He hopes that he'll have an opportunity to work with you."

Shen Luo smiled, refusing him tactfully, "I don't shoot people."

Raising a brow, Bai Jinyi shifted his gaze back onto Xia Yiyang's face.

Xia Yiyang's lips spread a genial smile, blinking as he seemed a little puzzled.

"It seems like you already have an exclusive model." Bai Jinyi tucked the album away. It looked like he had come to a realization very quickly, and there was a somewhat irritating conceit on his face. "Congratulations."

Xia Yiyang was baffled. "What are you congratulating him for?"

Giving a fake cough, Shen Luo slid an arm around Xia Yiyang's shoulders, speaking mildly, "Nothing… the performance is about to start. Just watch your Jiang-laoshi and Ji-laoshi."

This was a small-scale, personal ballet. The only accompaniment was Ji Qinyang on the piano, and Jiang Shen danced alone. There were a total of three acts, depicting a day in the life of a swan — from morning, noon, to finally falling asleep peacefully in the lake after sunset.

When the performance ended, the entire theatre gave a standing ovation. Jiang Shen did his curtain call, inviting Ji Qinyang to the front of the stage as well, thanking the audience again together. Xi Yiyang's hands were red from clapping, and Xie Meng mouthed at him, "Let's go backstage."

Xia Xiyang wasn't alone. This was also Shen Luo's first time backstage for such an artistic performance. After seeking permission, he went around filming with his GoPro. In Xie Meng's arms were two bouquets, one for Jiang Shen and the other for Ji Qinyang. Ji Qinyang was momentarily unable to control his emotions, and lifted Xie Meng up, spinning in a circle right then and there.

Xia Yiyang thought it was weird that Bai Jinyi did not carry any flowers. He was still wondering about it when he walked into Jiang Shen's dressing room and discovered that it was already filled to the brim with flowers. Other than a flower stand from Bai Jinyi, there were so many flowers from fans all over the world that there was not enough space for them all. Jiang Shen was in the midst of removing

his makeup, and when he saw Bai Jinyi enter, he jerked his head around. His makeup had yet to be removed completely, and with a face still smeared with colors, he lunged into the boxing king's arms.

Xia Yiyang had no words. He could not help but exclaim a little enviously, "It's good to be young."

Shen Luo slowly turned his Gopro around the room, then suddenly pulled Xia Yiyang over, aiming the lens at him.

Behind them were two couples clinging onto each other.

"Just ignore them." Shen Luo bowed his head slightly, nuzzling into Xia Yiyang's cheek. "Let's take a picture."

After so many years, Xia Yiyang still got nervous when facing a camera, especially during such deliberate shots. The only pose he could think of was the peace sign.

Just as he conscientiously held his fingers up, giving a big grin, Shen Luo's kiss landed out of nowhere onto his face.

His fingers a little stiff, Xia Yiyang turned around a beat later, only to be kissed on the lips by Shen Luo.

"We're not old either." Shen Luo's GoPro was still aimed at him, and he complimented Xia Yiyang, "You're really handsome today."

## Extra 6 — 2022 New Year

Due to their careers, Bai Jinyi and Jiang Shen rarely spent the New Year back home. They would either be participating in a competition or a performance, and it was only in recent years when they were both more recognized in their professional circles did the then reduce their participation in such events that hap-pened around the new year, striving to spend the New Year with their families and friends.

A year ago, Bai Jinyi had just fought in the World Boxing Championship. It was very close, and his win came as a result of comparing the score between each contender. Other than the injuries on his body, there was also a bruise on his face. Having been in fighting in professional boxing circles for so many years, he was already used to it, and being bruised from head to toe was something normal for him.

Before the New Year, he returned to Shanghai, spending a few good days with his parents. Due to the injury on his face, he wasn't able to meet too many people. Qin Wanjun's heart at first ached for her son, but once they spent a little too much time together, she started to scorn him for his build, that he was taking up too much space.

“When are you leaving?” The mother could not help but start chasing her son off.

Lying on the couch, Bai Jinyi was eating a salad, looking exceptionally like a bum during this off season. “He still has a performance in Shanghai. I thought you were attending it? We'll go back after his performance.”

Qin Wanjun said, “You're not going with me to watch it anyway.”

Bai Jinyi shot his mother a look, pointing at the bruise on his face with the handle of his spoon and not say-ing a word.

Qin Wanjun felt a little sheepish. During this month, Jiang Shen was actually been performing in Shanghai Theatre. She attended every show, and even concealed the truth from her “son-in-law” on behalf of her son, telling him that Bai Jinyi had been in the boxing gym the whole time and had yet to return. She was afraid that Jiang Shen would discover how badly Bai Jinyi's face was injured, and that it would affect the relation-ship between the couple.

The pressure of the lie lay heavily on Qin Wanjun. “You've already been together for so long. It's not like he doesn't know about the realities of your profession!” Scorning her son for being so weak, she said, “Why are you so afraid of your partner?!”

With his spoon in his mouth, he spoke extremely calmly, not caring a bit about his dignity at all, “I have no choice. Your son is very handsome, and he's a sugar baby.”

Qin Wanjun was left speechless.

Incidentally, something had happened recently that had astounded Jiang Shen's entire village. It wasn't Bai Jinyi winning the boxing championship again (having followed his partner's lot in life, he was also considered half a villager now), nor was it Jiang Shen's dance troupe winning an award, but it was about Chen Maoxiu, also known as Goumao. He had married a doctorate student.

Jiang Shen at first thought that the doctorate student had been deceived, and he was very worried whether it was Goumao who had basically stalked the woman into forcing her to be together with him. As such, the first thing they did when everyone was home for the New Year was to gather together, all of them ready to take a good luck at Goumao's wife.

Holy moly, this was Chen Maoxiu, Goumao, the stupidest person in their entire village (not really)! He was actually going to marry a doctorate student!

Miao Hua'er felt that their family must have struck a fortune. They must have done a lot of good deeds in their previous life, and thus in this life, her son was able to marry a doctorate student!

In any case, that night, all members of the few families gathered at Cultural Hall. Around the big round table sat about seventeen or eighteen people, and Goumao's wife was surrounded.

Everyone was dressed in their absolute best, looking perfectly styled and dignified, all trying their hardest to look like they were cultured. Yang Shaohui had actually never expected that she would be faced with such a situation. At first, she was even a little worried that being a little older, as well as being a doctorate student, she wouldn't be able to get on well with the others. In the end, she didn't need to do anything at all, and the atmosphere along the entire street was as though one of the households had produced a Top Schol-ar. Everyone spoke to her with the greatest care, they were all gentle and considerate, suppressing their passion as they were afraid of frightening her.

Her soon-to-be mother-in-law, Miao Hua'er, having such a fierce and tough character, also became very gentle when talking to her.

Not only was she gentle, she was very proud as well. From what she observed over the past few days, the number of times the older lady mentioned “my daughter-in-law” to others far exceeded the number of times she mentioned “my son” over the past thirty years.

Goumao was feeling very shy as well. He introduced Yang Shaohui to these famous friends of his, including his sister who was an artist. Although Yang Shaohui knew about them very early on, when actually seeing them, her emotions were still rather complicated.

She did feel a little unworthy of the overwhelming passion these people lavished on her, and so with great humility, she said in a low pitch voice, “Compared to everyone here, I'm only an ordinary person. You are the truly impressive ones.”

Chen Qingling said quietly, “How are we impressive? The few of us, ever since the second year of high school, other than the three main subjects, we've never passed any of the rest...”

Yang Shaohui looked at them questioningly.

Chen Maoxiu nodded, speaking to her with great earnestness, “In the past, we only worshipped Shubao, but now we have you. You're even better at studying than he is, and from now on, you're the Star of Wisdom for all of us!”

Yang Shaohui was left speechless.

Easter Egg:

A year ago, after getting injured, there was a very long period of time when Bai Jinyi did not watch any of the performances by Jiang Shen's dance troupe. The reason he gave was that he had to attend a training camp in his gym. Naturally, he wasn't, and every day, he was trying to think of ways to make his face heal faster.

For the first week, Jiang Shen did believe him, and he did not ask more about it. However, during the sec-ond week, he called Bai Jinyi asking when he would come back. The other party hemmed and hawed for quite a while, and Jiang Shen started to become unhappy.

This was actually due to something Bai Jinyi himself might not have known about. Jiang Shen would cut out all the various articles of “nonsense flattery” from magazines and newspapers. Other than the flattery from foreign media, their country's boxing circle had been brought into the light by Bai Jinyi as well. Boxing was now very popular, and along with his exceptional appearance, Bai Jinyi would even occasionally appear within the pages of entertainment news.

“Let me ask you.” Jiang Shen was very serious, and his tone didn't sound like he was joking at all. “Are you starting to look at the other flowers out there?”

Bai Jinyi was baffled. He did not even understand what it meant by “looking at the other flowers out there”, and his answer did not match the question at all. “I've sent you many flowers. You didn't receive them at all?”

Jiang Shen was even more angry. “Then why didn't you come and see me?”

“... Isn't it because I'm busy now...”

“You're lying,” said Jiang Shen unhappily. “I asked Lai Song already. There's no training camp right now. Have you gone to have an affair behind my back?”

Bai Jinyi was completely speechless.

Jiang Shen said savagely, “If you dare have an affair, in our village, you'll be locked into a pig's cage and drowned!”

Jiang Shen had made this call right in front of the other members of the dance troupe. As leading figures in their artistry, the dancers' jaws fell open, stunned as they listened to their troupe leader give such a bla-tant and straightforward threat.

Jiang Shen's temper was still flaring, and he was saying things like, “If you still don't come, the old ladies in the village will gossip about us when we go home for the New Year!”

Bai Jinyi wondered which old ladies Jiang Shen was referring to, and whether he knew them or not.

However, that was only an afterthought. At that moment, to coax Jiang Shen, Bai Jinyi had hung up and headed straight for the dance troupe. The injury on his face had yet to heal, and after Jiang Shen's performance concluded, the two people stayed alone in Jiang Shen's lounge for over two hours.

In between, Troupe Leader Jiang could be heard in a rage. “He actually punched you so hard?!” “Did you punch him back?” “Ever since we were children, our village taught us that as boys, we can never let our fac-es get hit in a fight!”

After the explosion of anger, the heartache could be heard in his voice, saying things like “I'll blow on it, the pain will fly away”. It was unclear if it was Bai Jinyi who forced their troupe leader to say such things — according to one dance troupe member.

## Extra 7 —Author's Interview

Q1: Describe yourself using one animal.
A: A cat or dog.

Q2: What's your most confident specialty?
A: Shopping on Taobao.

Q3: Which emoji do you use most frequently on WeChat?
A: hahahahaha.jpg

Q4: Do you prefer to go shopping or stay at home?
A: Stay at home.

Q5: Do you have something you like to eat the most?
A: Rice noodles.

Q6: Is there somewhere you wish to go the most?
A: Probably the South Pole.

Q7: Is there something you really want to do but don't dare to?
A: Bungee jumping.

Q8: What is your view on love?
A: One true love for the entirety of your life.

Q9: Why did you start on the path of writing?
A: After reading too many novels, I discovered that I couldn't find any more that I wanted to read, and so I could only 'feed myself'.

Q10: If not an author, what field would you like to be in?
a: Finance.

Q11: When writing, did anything interesting happen that you'd like to share?
A: Coming up with various ideas felt very good.

Q12: After writing for so long, what's the most valuable thing you've gained from it?
A: That I was able to gain so many adorable readers.

Q13: I heard that while writing, authors feel a sense of isolation. In order to focus on creating, not only do they not have time for fun, it's also very taxing. Geng-*da*, what do you think of this?
A: It does happen, so I have to adjust myself emotionally, and relax adequately.

Q14: I've noticed that the stories that Geng-*da* writes are all heartwarming and healing, and they're very sweet as well. Is this your favourite style, or the style you're best at?

A: Yes, sweetness is a necessary conclusion.

Q15: Geng-*da* has created so many characters, both male and female, and they each have their own unique characteristics. As their 'mother', which character do you like the most, and why?

A: I love every single one of them… I cannot be biased towards a particular child.

Q16: Does Geng-*da* have any thoughts about your achievements in writing?

A: I've only just started, there's no achievements to talk about, hahaha

Q17: One sentence to recommend you and your works to others.

A: Extremely sweet!

Q18: Acknowledged as 'Suzhou's Tourism Ambassador', does Geng-*da* have anything to say?

A: I'm honored! I'm very happy to share my hometown with everyone.

Q19: If fans would like to go to Suzhou, do you have any guides for them to reference?

A: There are many guides that readers have created after going to Suzhou on Weibo, and they're much better than what I can do hahaha

Q20: When writing *Nianhua*, why did you create the two characters Shen Luo and Xia Yiyang?

A: Because I wanted to write about the interactions between two mature men.

Q21: Why did you think of writing *Salad Days*, a story about chasing dreams?

A: Because I wanted to share my interpretation about such dreams.

Q22: Do Geng-*da*'s characters come from any actual references in real life?

A: No. They might contain some shadows of my friends, but there's no actual direct references.

Q23: Describe the couple Song Xin and Lai Song.

A: A love-hate relationship!

Q24: Is there a chance for Mr. Pu and Liu Xingzhi to have their own story?

A: I don't have a definite answer hahaha

Q25: Will Chen Maoxiu and Professor Yang have their own story?

A: I also don't have a definite answer.

Q26: What sort of girl do you think is suited for Shen Shubao?

A: I don't know, I've never thought about Shubao-*ge*'s other half. Shubao-*ge* belongs to everyone!

Q27: If one day, Qingling-*zi* were to tell everyone that she's in a relationship, how would Chen Maoxiu react?

A: He'll probably go look for her boyfriend to have a fight hahahaha

Q28: Ji Qinyang and Xie Meng, Shen Luo and Xia Yiyang, Bai Jinyi and Jiang Shen, will they have another chance to appear again on the same stage again together?

A: There's also no definite answer hahaha

Q29: They've started to separate the trash for trash collection in Shanghai already. May I ask what Shen Luo and Xia Yiyang think about this?

A: They'll probably hire a housekeeper ★laughs★

Q30: One last question, many readers like Geng-*da* and Geng-*da*'s works very much. Do you have anything you'd like to say to them?

A: I hope that my readers will be forever blissful, happy, and healthy, just like the words I write at the beginning or end of every novel. It's especially so with regards to health, because I have a reader who used to be very ill in the past, and would occasionally leave messages for me on Weibo, telling me about her health, her illness, and her surgeries, and I would chat with her. I'm very worried about her health, so I sincerely hope that all of you readers will be blissful and happy, healthy and full of joy.

## Afterword

The creation of *Salad Days* actually happened in a very unexpected state.

Because I truly like the life in a farming village, I looked forward to writing a child like that, growing up amongst the fish and paddy fields. And so, Jiang Shen and his friends came to be.

I then wanted to write about the things these children liked and pursued, so the theme of dreams was born.

Many people equate dreams to youth, but I didn't want to do it so simply.

In youth, we have dreams, but in dreams, we have an entire lifetime.

This was the meaning behind the creation of this novel.

A child's dream won't just vanish and disappear. It's not a short-lived flame, nor a flicker of light. I hope your dreams will become the eternal Milky Way in your memories, accompanying you as you grow, never to be extinguished.

Many people say that when a storyline is too beautiful, there may be a lack of obstacles, of twists and turns, but I actually don't mind.

To me, the essential purpose of a story is to weave dreams, and provide beauty.

If we can write about the cruelty of reality, then we can also elucidate warmth and perfection.

*Salad Days* is a book that leans more towards the latter.

In *Salad Days*, there are no villains in the pure sense of its meaning. All of its characters are good and gentle. They expose their soft bellies to the world, radiating kindness and warmth.

I hope everyone will be able to meet people like that, or become someone like that.

I've always believed that words are the window to a writer's character, and that my writing reflects me.

Every novel, every time I start writing, I always hope that the reader is able to understand me better.

Reading is a double ended interaction. Through words, the reader comes into contact with the author's soul, and through feedback, the author gets to understand the reader's spirit.

I am truly, very happy that many people love *Salad Day.*

This tiny, little novel with its tiny, little world and tiny, little utopia, was able to bring you joy and warmth. This is the reason why I create, and I'm truly grateful.

I think, in the future, I will create even more works that are like *Salad Days*, or perhaps works that are completely different.

The little swan Jiang Shen, and Richie Rich Bai Jinyi, they will become that feather in my warmth, bringing a gentle joy to everyone.

And in this book, there are also those supporting characters that I like just as much.

They may not be the main characters. In their lives, there might be gains and losses, choices and giving up. Just like us, they represent all the ordinary people.

The ordinary lives of the ordinary people, with ordinary feelings or dreams, yet they gleam and shine just like diamonds.

Everyone is like that.

Although it's something I wrote myself, when I read it, I still feel that it's wonderful that I was able to write it, so gentle and warm.

In the future, I want to write more people like that.

I want to write about all the ordinary, extraordinary people who are kind and good.

I want to write about their simple, yet bright and shining lives.

Thank you to everyone who has read up to this point.

I hope that everyone who has read this novel is able to feel a joy from deep within themselves. I hope that everyone is happy and healthy.

Writing perhaps is instinctual for me.

But because you guys have read what I wrote, you have filled this instinct of mine with meaning.

You've given me much more warmth and gentleness than what I've given you.

And I thank you again for that.

Finally, I still hope that the publication of *Salad Days* will bring joy and hope to everyone.

Just like the two gentle, passionate youths I wrote about in this book.

Like the wind caressing the green mountains.

Like the flames burning up the withered grass.

Like a sea of peach blossoms.

Like a land frozen in winter.

I hope that you'll be able to experience all the sweetness in the world, as well as smile through the pain and suffering that is not worth mentioning in life.

Just like what the book said.

I hope that all the youth and dreams will be able to make their way towards eternality and immortality in the distant future.

“I hope that in your life, your dreams will glow ever so brightly, and that you will grow wildly, unhindered and unwavering.

——————————————— Your eternal sugar, *Jing Shui Bian*

## About the Author

Jing Shui Bian / □□□

Once known as Geng/Mugeng Mugeng(□/□□□□)
Good with writing affectionate and moving emotions.
Works relate closely to life;
Describing the various tenderness and beauty in life;
Weaving countless encounters of romance and happiness in youth.

Other books by Jing Shui Bian:
*Silent Hearts*
*Times of Our Lives*
*Salad Days*
*Star Ocean*